

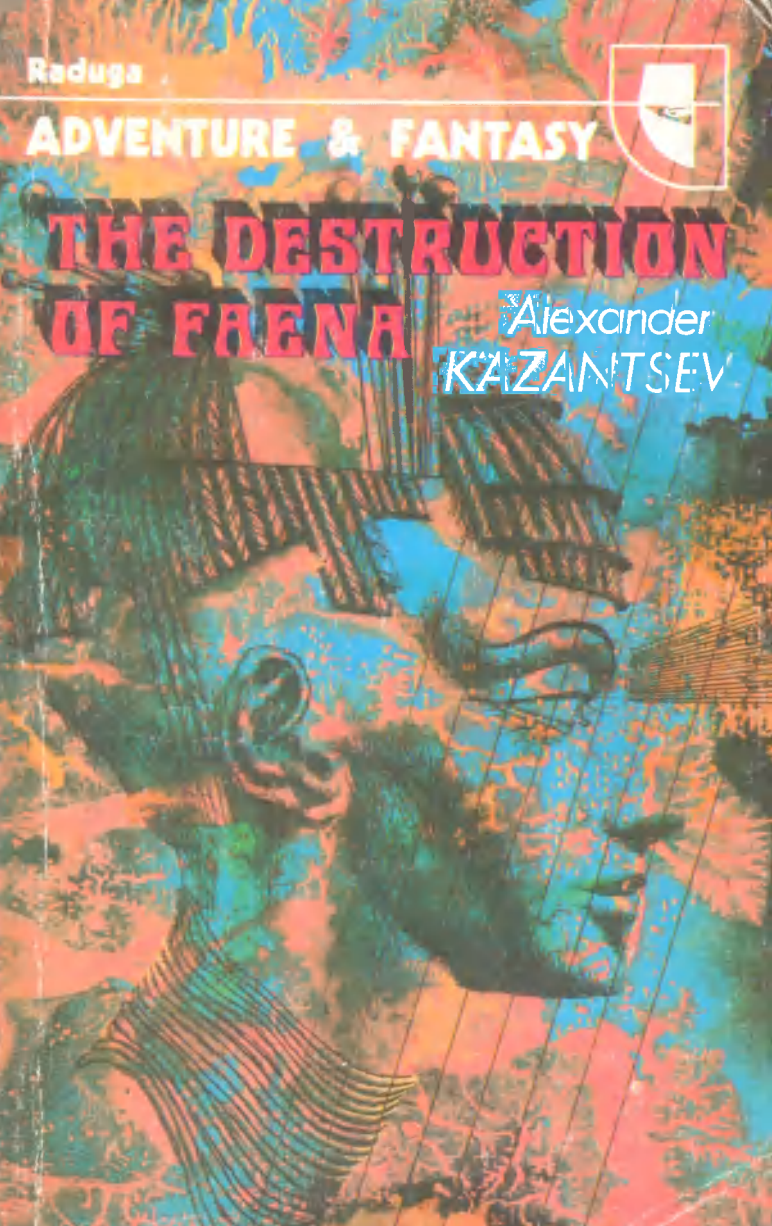
Raduga

ADVENTURE & FANTASY



THE DESTRUCTION OF FRENA

Alexander
KAZANTSEV





Alexander KAZANTSEV

THE DESTRUCTION
OF FAENA

Translated by *Alex Miller*



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CONTENTS

7	<i>From the author</i>	
10	<i>Part One. Tension</i>	
10	Chapter One.	The Wave
20	Chapter Two.	Two Shores
31	Chapter Three.	The Masters
49	Chapter Four.	The Temple of Eternity
58	Chapter Five.	Blood
67	Chapter Six.	No Happiness in this World
79	Chapter Seven.	The Forgotten Hump
94	<i>Part Two. Explosion</i>	
94	Chapter One.	The Little World
106	Chapter Two.	The Golden Apple
117	Chapter Three.	Paradise Found
131	Chapter Four.	At the Peak of Civilisation
148	Chapter Five.	Craters in the Wilderness
162	Chapter Six.	Judgement
176	Chapter Seven.	The Star of Hatred
188	<i>Part Three. Fragments</i>	
188	Chapter One.	Twilight
201	Chapter Two.	Mutiny in Space
214	Chapter Three.	In the Name of Reason
227	Chapter Four.	Spiders in a Jar
239	Chapter Five.	The Naked Leader
253	Chapter Six.	The Testament of the Great Elder
267	<i>Epilogue. The Talking Beast</i>	

From the author

Cosmogony is no less full of riddles than the history of Earth. And where there are riddles, there is room for fantasy. However, if it is divorced from reality and rejects verisimilitude and authenticity, fantasy is empty, it leaves no trace in the heart; the best it can do is to titillate the reader's senses. But I have always wanted to achieve "authenticity in the incredible", to write fantasy founded solely on real facts and unsolved mysteries.

One such riddle that excited me was the ring of asteroids (minor planets) between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter instead of the planet, as predicted by Kepler's law, which had exploded for some unknown reason, scattering fragments all round its orbit. How could that have happened?

If the planet had exploded from within because of certain processes, its fragments would have flown in all directions as from a high-explosive bomb and would have continued moving round the sun in elongated elliptical orbits... But they are moving round in their former almost circular planetary orbit. If the planet had perished because of a collision with another cosmic body, their common fragments would have tended towards a resultant, also acquiring elongated elliptical orbits; but they have virtually stayed where they were.

The planet apparently cracked as the result of a powerful impact received simultaneously from all directions; it then disintegrated under the influence of the gravity of Mars and Jupiter. Its remains kept colliding and breaking up, creating swarms of meteorites and stringing out round the whole former orbit of the planet. But what kind of explosion was it? The explosion of its water envelope, its oceans?

It so happened that I was able to put this question to the great 20th-century physicist Nils Bohr when he met us Moscow writers.

"Can all a planet's oceans explode if a superpowerful nuclear device is detonated in their depths?" I asked him.

"I don't deny such a possibility," he replied, and added, "but even if it weren't so, nuclear weapons must be banned in any case."

He understood it all at once! If the planet

had perished when its oceans exploded, then there was a civilisation on it that had destroyed itself because of a nuclear war.

This was the stimulus for me as a novelist to write my trilogy *The Faetians*. Other problems found their way into it. Why has the missing link between man and the Earth's animal world never been discovered? Why does Mars seem uninhabited, and was it always so? Why did great cataclysms occur on Earth, such as the sinking of Atlantis and the rise of the Andes? According to some theories, the cause was a gigantic asteroid that fell onto Earth, or the appearance of the hitherto non-existent Moon in the sky over Earth. Is this so?

The reader will learn all about it in the novel as he follows the lives of the characters, who witnessed unprecedented catastrophes.

The author will be happy if this book helps the reader to acquire a taste for the great secrets of the Universe and of Earth's history.

Alexander Kazantsev

*Peace is the virtue of civilisation,
War is its crime.*

Victor Hugo

PART ONE

Tension

*Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace, Profaners of
this neighbour-stained steel, Will they not hear?—
What ho! You men, you beasts,
That quench the fire of your pernicious rage
With purple fountains issuing from your veins,
On pain of torture, from those bloody hands
Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground...*

W. Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*

Chapter One

THE WAVE

*Translation of an extraterrestrial message
inscribed in the language of the Faetians who
lived on Faena a million years ago.**

The only daughter of the Dictator of Powermania, an ancient continent of Faena, was named Yasna after her mother. Her father, Yar Jupi, had been hoping for a son, but he loved his daughter beyond measure. He kept dreaming that she would grow up, get married and leave him. When, as was the custom, he needed to give his grown-up daughter a final name, he could think of nothing better than calling her Mada, which meant Falling-in-love. Surnames on Faena

*Books 2 and 3 of my science-fantasy novel, *The Faetians*, tell of who wrote and sent this message to Earth and who deciphered it.

were borrowed from the stars and planets. For example, Mar, Judi, Alt or Sirius.

Mada Judi took after her mother: she was called beautiful. Her face baffled the artists, being lively, always changing, now merry, now clear, now pensive. How could they paint her? She typified the best of the longfaces, but the oval of her features was moderate and soft, her nose was straight and her lips were firmly compressed.

This blue-eyed Faetess (as they were called on Faena) was met on the Great Shore by Ave Mar, a visitor to Powermania. The girl was coming out of the water, having chosen the moment when a breaker had crashed on the shore and was sliding back in a mass of hissing foam.

Ave wished he had been a sculptor. Everything he had heard about Mada from his hunchbacked secretary Kutsi Merc was pale, inadequate and dull compared with what he could see with his own eyes.

A fat, elderly Faetess, one of the round-heads, ran into the water and wrapped the girl in a soft, fluffy sheet as she emerged.

Mada took no notice whatever of Ave, although from what her companion had told her, she knew quite a lot about him. The nanny deftly put a folding chair down on the sand and Mada sat on it, wrapping the sheet round her as the ancients used to drape themselves in their robes.

Kutsi Merc noticed the impression that Mada had made on Ave, and he hunched his back even more as he bent down to speak.

"Shall we show this to the local natives?" And with a significant smile on his clever, evil face, he held a small, smooth board out to Ave.

Sitting on the sand and admiring Mada, Ave vaguely replied:

"Well, I didn't realise we'd brought that with us!"

"The proud and beautiful Mada Jupi is here," said the secretary encouragingly.

Ave Mar stood up. Thanks to his impressive height, long, strong neck and piercing eyes, he gave the impression of looking over the heads of everybody else.

In obedience to his own impulse, as it seemed to him, he took the board from Kutsi and walked boldly with it into the water.

Without taking her eyes off Kutsi, Mada's companion whispered into the girl's ear:

"Look, Mada! The stranger from Danjab I was telling you about has taken a board with him."

In spite of the breakwater, built to make swimming easier when the tide was coming in, the waves were crashing violently onto the shore. Outside the barrier, they were truly gigantic, rearing up their foaming crests one after another as on the open sea.

"Where's he swimming to?" asked Mada's companion in alarm. "Shouldn't we call the lifeguards?"

"He's a better swimmer than you think," commented Mada vaguely.

"But why's he taken that board? It's frightening to watch."

Even so, she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Ave swam as far as the breakwater and climbed over it. He had now attracted the attention of many swimmers.

"Why did you decide he's that particular stranger?" asked Mada.

"Because of his companion. Roundheaded, like me; a hunchback into the bargain, yet he's as proud as if he was strolling along the beach of Danjab. I feel ashamed for our own people. Isn't anyone going to teach that show-off how to swim?"

"No, I don't want to," said Mada, watching as the gigantic breakers swept the foreign visitor up onto their crests.

And suddenly all the holidaymakers on the beach stirred in amazement.

The swimmer chose the moment when a particularly big wave lifted him up on its crest, jumped to his feet and waved his arms, as if wanting to fly like a bird. He did not take off, however, but simply kept his balance on the slippery board. He stood like that on the foaming crest and with frightening speed swept towards the shore, clad in foam and spray. It seemed incredible that he should stay on the moving watery mountain. But the madman not only held his position; laughing defiantly, he began gliding down the steep watery slope, then allowed the wave to throw him upon its crest again.

The crowded beach gasped at this bold display of skill.

"But I must see how that's done," said Mada determinedly, casting off the "ancient

robe" and handing it to her worried nanny.

"What are you doing, my dear?" she protested, forgetting her recent advice. "He'll bump you with his board. And is it fitting for the daughter of Yar Jupi to swim beside him?"

Mada ran into the sea and dived into an oncoming wave. The dark cap of stretch material protecting her thick hair from the water bobbed amid the foaming crests.

Mada swam as far as the breakwater and climbed onto it. From there she saw the foreign swimmer going back to the sea with his board for another ride on the breakers. She waved to him, although he could not see her.

There was unlikely to be as skilful a swimmer on the Great Shore as Mada. The ocean waves bore her up onto their crests and tried to hurl her back. But she was not accustomed to giving up once she had set her heart on something. She decided that she absolutely must stand on that magic board, and no force in the world could have stopped her.

The foreigner swimming away from the shore didn't even look round.

Mada only had a glimpse of the stranger, but as she swam after him she had the distinct impression of an athletic figure in a loincloth, strong muscles rippling under the skin, and curly hair as tousled as that of a boy.

Suddenly, Mada saw him. He was standing on a foaming crest. The water seemed to be boiling under him, and with reckless abandon

he began gliding down the watery slope straight at Mada.

Ave noticed her at the last moment and jumped, while Mada dived under the board.

It seemed to her that the wave had crashed down on her, but it was just the board grazing her slightly.

Mada surfaced and looked round. The stranger's eyes met hers as he bobbed up to the surface. He laughed joyfully and promptly began swimming towards her, seizing the board on the way.

"Hold on!" he shouted while still some distance off.

Mada could not make anything out, but she smiled in answer, since she realised that he was hurrying to her assistance. When he swam up to her, she said:

"I want to stand on that..." and she pointed at the board.

"Ave Mar will be happy to help..."

"Mada Judi."

"You'll learn the meaning of joy, strength and happiness!"

The people standing on the shore watched what was happening on the other side of the breakwater. A sigh coursed along the beach when the two figures appeared standing straight up on the crest of a wave, holding on to one another and each evidently standing with one foot on the board. It seemed like a miracle. With their arms round each other's waists in full view of the onlookers and without falling, they were borne on the foaming crest towards the beach.

Never had Mada experienced such pleasure before.

Even so, when Mada and Ave crossed the breakwater and were returning with the board to the crowded beach, Mada felt uneasy. If someone had told her the day before that she was capable of such flightiness, she would have burst out laughing.

Ave held the board in one hand and was ready to help Mada with the other if the surf swept her off her feet. But Mada went ahead of him and, skipping over the gurgling foam with a laugh, was the first to run up onto the beach.

She seemed to be showing that, as the Dictator's daughter, she could do whatever she liked!

Her anxious companion wrapped her charge up in the fluffy sheet.

"How good it was! If you only knew how good it was, Mother Lua!"

"As if I couldn't know," she grumbled. "I nearly died, waiting for you. If anything happened to you, I'd surely be executed by order of Yar Jupi (may he be happy, the great man!)"

"It's a good thing you're alive and can help me with one or two little matters."

Mother Lua gave her a stern look.

"It frightens me to think of it, my dear."

Mother Lua had guessed rightly about her charge's intentions. Mada had always dreamed about a real Faetian, manly, noble and pure. The uncultured Faetians among the Superiors, flaunting a civilisation that had become static

since ancient times, repelled her with their boorishness, arrogance and contempt for the roundheads, whose children her mother had once nursed. The stranger, as her nanny had told her, was alien to all gloomy superstitions of the Superiors; he was a scholar of Danjab who was not afraid to break free of the Science of Death there and end up at loggerheads with everybody. It was just such a Faetian that Mada could dream about, and he had, on top of all that, turned out to be athletic, daring and handsome.

It was innate in Faetians to be mutually attracted "at first sight", which they did not always admit even to themselves.

The daughter of Yar Jupi had justified the name her father had given her—she had fallen in love straightway with a visitor clad in foam and, in Mother Lua's opinion, had lost her wits.

"Think, my dear! If he was a longface, it would have been all right. But they're going to call this one a half-breed. Contempt and hatred! Think again, my dear! I taught you the truth about all the Faetians, but not for that!.."

"No," replied Mada firmly. "Let it be the way I want it. You will go to his companion and tell him where Ave and I are going to meet."

"You'll be noticed together! The Blood Guard will seize him. Don't wish him harm."

"It shall be as I have said. Others will not be able to look at us. We shall meet in the palace garden."

"The garden behind the Wall?" echoed Lua in alarm.

"You will escort them through the Blood Door."

Mother Lua looked downcast. But Mada paid no attention to her, walking on with her chin up.

The Blood Door! It was one of the most reliable of the devices in the Lair, as the Dictator's palace was called. Yar Jupi had long been racked by persecution mania. It seemed to him that there were conspiracies under way everywhere to assassinate him. Consequently, he had been living for many cycles without leaving the territory of the Lair and never letting himself be seen outside its walls. He communicated with his subordinates only over closed TV. He trusted no one. Security was maintained at key points by automatons who admitted only chosen Faetians with identifiable brain biocurrents.

Only the Faetians closest to the Dictator could use the Blood Door. There was no other key to it and no outsider could open it.

And now Mother Lua had to escort foreigners into the garden outside the Wall. She knew that her charge would not change her mind. Moreover, she did not want to obstruct Mada in any case.

Need it be said that Ave, the young Faetian, had also fallen in love? Inclined to extremes by nature, time and time again he relived the moments when, with their arms round each other's waists, he and the wonderful Faetess had ridden the surf together. He

was in a fever, but he could not imagine how to see his beloved again, since she had turned out to be Yar Judi's daughter.

Grunting as if carrying a heavy load, Kutsi Merc trudged along behind Ave. He was not in the least surprised to notice that the nurse had fallen behind her charge and was adjusting a shoelace.

Letting Ave go ahead, the hunchback hung back near the roundhead, and she, without straightening up, said almost inaudibly:

"As soon as shining Judi rises in the sky, take your master to the ruins of the old shrine in the Dread Wall."

Kutsi Merc nodded, grinned craftily and caught up with his master.

"Success is the envy of failures. A tryst has been made at the old ruins in the light of Judi, the brightest of planets."

Ave looked round suddenly.

"Are you jesting?"

"Jesting is of no avail in my profession. Kutsi Merc is too good a ... helper."

By a whim of the Dictator's, the Dread Wall round his Lair ran through a tiny ruined shrine dividing it into two halves. This screened from view the Blood Door, which was hardly noticeable in any case. The wall in the lower part divided in obedience to the brain biocurrents written into the program of the electronic automatons.

Mother Lua nervously gave the door its mental instructions and it opened.

Ave and Kutsi Merc, who were standing

in the half-ruined portico, quickly proceeded through the gap, Lua followed them and the Wall closed behind her. Only the ruins on the inner side of the wall showed where to look for the vanished door.

Ave looked round. He was in a luxuriant garden. Sinuous lianas hung down like snakes guarding their prey. Beyond the shaggy tree-trunks lurked a gloom that seemed dense and clammy. Lua, the nocturnal luminary whose name the nurse bore, had not yet begun to rise, and Jupi, the brightest of the planets, was only just silvering the tree-tops. Under them it was as dark as on a starless night.

The young Faetian's heart was thudding in his breast.

Kutsi Merc's pulse was throbbing evenly enough. He had gained access to the Lair, into which not even a snake could crawl its way...

Chapter Two

TWO SHORES

Ave Mar first met Kutsi Merc, his secretary, half a cycle before the encounter with Mada on the Great Shore.

Ave Mar's steamcar stopped that day in a mountain pass on the continent of the Culturals of Danjab.

The view took Ave's breath away. The ocean, revealed from high up, seemed to ascend to the very heavens. The misty band of the horizon looked like a ridge of lofty clouds.

Below lay Business City. The skyscrapers stood in concentric circles. They were linked by ring and radial streets and avenues, on both sides of which lay green parks and glittering lakes. In the city centre towered a skyscraper resembling the conical axis of the monstrous Wheel of Business Life.

Ave put his foot down on the pedal to open the high-pressure boiler valve. The steam drive slowly moved the car from its place, accelerating it to the required speed.

Steamcars had appeared very recently, but had quickly replaced the obsolete vehicles powered by internal combustion engines. In their time, these machines had poisoned the air of the cities with their exhaust gases. The fuel they consumed could have served as chemical raw material for clothing and other goods in daily use.

As he drove at top speed along the magnificent road, Ave Mar crossed the outer circle avenue on which stood the tower blocks of Business City.

From a distance, they seemed conical. In fact, they were stepped. They were girt by a spiral steamcar road which gave access to each storey in succession and to the garage entrances outside every flat.

The conical towers housed shops with corridors leading to exits onto the spiral road, restaurants, cafes, and also theatres and concert or viewing halls. There were production workshops and business offices in the centre of the multistorey building.

Moving staircases led to the garages under the living quarters.

The ordinary Faetians, toiling in the workshops, had no cars and hardly ever left their cramped little rooms, unaware of any world other than that shut in by the skyscraper's spiral roadway.

Ave stopped his steamcar. The garage doors opened automatically and closed behind him when he had driven in.

The car needed no maintenance, being permanently ready for use with the necessary steam pressure in its boiler. The heating device of disintegration matter was, so to speak, part of the machine and wore out with it.

Ave Mar was in a dejected mood. He dropped in on one of his friends; but the friend had summoned a secret meeting and had not invited Ave. Ave understood what it was all about and drove off immediately.

On the way back he saw the pathetic hovels of the Faetians who worked in the fields. He felt ashamed of himself for having, over his garage, several living rooms in which no one lived, in fact, except for himself.

He had never known lack of room, but he had known loneliness and could only call up his mother over the screen. Oh, Mother, Mother! Even at that enormous distance, she unerringly guessed what was in her son's heart and was always the first to appear on the screen.

Ave glumly stepped onto the upward moving staircase.

What was the meaning of life, if all that

lay ahead was a blind alley from which the Faetians could not escape? It was madness to seek deliverance in wars of annihilation. Many Faetians understood as much...

But why did his friends not trust him? He needn't keep quiet with them. Did he not also subscribe to the Doctrine of Justice? But they didn't need him... No one needed him...

Ave went into the first of his round rooms and stopped dead in amazement. A broad-shouldered, burly hunchback came up to meet him with a guarded smile on his hard face.

"Ease and happiness!" said the stranger. "I am Kutsi Merc! The Ruler Dobr Mar gave me the key of this flat as his son's secretary."

Ave smiled bitterly.

"Is my father worried that his son is gnawed by misery?"

"Your father was thinking of something more important."

"Will it deliver me from bitterness?"

"Would it be a bad thing to visit the ancient continent of Powermania? High technology in the hands of barbarians who call themselves Superiors?"

"What's the sense of such dreams? I worked with Um Sat. I specialise in the disintegration of matter, so I am not allowed to travel overseas. We live in times of emptiness, disillusion, tension..."

"As your secretary, I shall help you in everything, even in a trip to the continent of the barbarians."

So saying, the hunchback went into the other room. He soon returned carrying vessels with beverages and two cylinders of compressed narcotic smoke which the Culturals loved to inhale when relaxing. Kutsi Merc's clothes were stretched tight over his hump, as if tailored for someone else.

Ave was amazed at the speed with which his new acquaintance made himself at home. The neglected flat was transformed. Mechanisms, switched on before the occupant's arrival, had cleaned the place up.

As he inhaled the smoke, the young Faetian studied Kutsi Merc.

"If only we journey to Powermania," he said reflectively, "before misery kills desire..."

"Desires must be fulfilled. Otherwise it is not worth desiring. The Faetesses over the ocean are very beautiful."

"How can that be of any importance? Even knowledge is powerless to lead the Faetians out of their blind alley. Soulless power politics, blind subordination to dogma! The blockheads refuse to listen to anything that is unfamiliar to them!.." Ave was suffering from rejection of his ideas and was airing his sense of injury.

"The great law of inertia! Inertia can be overcome by the application of energy. The law must be interpreted more broadly."

"Kutsi Merc is undoubtedly more than adequately equipped for the obligations of secretary."

"One must also overcome the inertia in

oneself." Kutsi Merc blew out an intricate pattern of smoke.

The hunchback was certainly astonishing Ave Mar; but there were still more surprises to come.

Kutsi now came to see Ave Mar every day and tirelessly told stories about the legendary continent of a very ancient civilisation. It turned out that he knew Powermania extremely well, was familiar with its history, art, and architecture, had evidently been there a number of times, and was fluent in the language of the barbarians, as he called the inhabitants of Powermania.

"Look and marvel. The depths of ignorance and the heights of knowledge, an alien technology and the wild theories of the Superiors, the slums of the roundheaded monsters and the legendary beauty, Mada Judi."

"The Dictator's daughter?" asked Ave, interested in spite of himself.

"Brought up by a most cultured nurse of roundhead stock. Became a Sister of Health, looks after children in spite of her father's Doctrine of Hatred. He loves her so much that he will tolerate any of her whims."

"What does she look like?" asked Ave vaguely.

Kutsi brightened up.

"The long legs of the runner, but feminine. The lines of her body would make a classical sculpture. A soft heart and the hauteur of pride. It's hard to win her indulgence."

"It looks as though Kutsi Merc has been having a try."

With a bitter smile, the hunchback pointed to his hump.

"Kutsi Merc bears too heavy a burden in life."

He had now completely relieved Ave Mar of his daily household chores. He went on talking about Powermania, but didn't mention Mada again.

It was Ave Mar who raised the subject of a possible journey over the sea.

Kutsi Merc had apparently been waiting for this.

"The berths on the ship have been booked."

Ave Mar stood on the deck of the ocean-going ship and looked into the distance. This time, the ocean wasn't rising to heaven, as in the view from the mountain pass, but it was as boundless and no less striking to the imagination.

Um Sat had confided a terrible secret to his pupil about this ocean. Every secret is a burden, and this one, concerning the destiny of all Faetians, was a particularly heavy weight on Ave's mind.

Kutsi warily tried to find out the cause of Ave's bad mood, but Ave avoided the subject by holding forth against scientists who would not accept his ideas about the possibility of life on other planets.

Kutsi grinned craftily and poked fun at the young Faetian, maintaining that the real reason was that he hadn't yet fallen in love.

The barbarians' continent appeared on the

horizon. Sharp arrows seemed to be sticking up out of the water. Over the sea rose the weird buildings of the ancient continent, on which the houses were not round, but rectangular (how absurd!). Incredibly crowded, they reached for the sky and gradually merged into a pile of irregular acute-angled pillars that suggested a cluster of crystals.

Almost leaping out of the water, a security launch raced towards the ship.

They were faced with the control procedure. Kutsi Merc sought out his master so as to be at his side.

Longfaced men with hooked noses were climbing aboard. They were all in identical angular clothes with collars upraised at the back and short dark hooded capes that became rectangular bands on the chest.

"Hey you, hunchbacked offspring of carrion-eaters! Make way before the Blood Guard!" snarled the first of the longfaces as he drew level with Kutsi Merc. "You'll have to get out of here and go back to your stinking island."

Ave Mar, who had specially learned the language of Powermania, flushed with rage but, on catching Kutsi's sidelong glance of warning, he kept quiet.

But Kutsi Merc arched his hump as he bowed, meekly lowering his head and using a manner of speech not his own, but typical of the local dialect.

"Perhaps the officer of the Blood Guard will be interested to know that the insignificant roundhead whom he sees before

him is only secretary to this distinguished traveller, the clear-thinking Ave Mar, son of the Ruler of Danjab."

The longface, who was wearing a beard in imitation of Dictator Yar Jupi, glanced contemptuously at Kutsi.

Ave Mar offered him his tokens.

"The athletic son of Ruler Dobr Mar is recognisable even without his tokens," said the officer, showing off his familiarity with the old manner of speech. "As for this contemptible roundheaded cripple, he should be attached as if by a chain to his master while serving him, as is preordained by nature." And the officer made for the other passengers.

Kutsi Merc ran after him, humbly begging the return of the tokens. The officer threw them down; they landed on the deck with a jingle and nearly rolled overboard. Kutsi Merc bent over to snatch them up and even went down on his knees.

The officer laughed coarsely.

"That's how to welcome the land of Superiors—in the posture of the lizard from which you are not so distantly descended."

"May happy days last for a long time here," replied Kutsi Merc humbly.

The ocean-going ship sailed into a harbour which was surrounded on all sides by enormous, weirdly rectangular buildings. Among them, Ave Mar immediately recognised several famous temples which had been built in ancient times and had towered high over

all the other buildings of that period. The city had risen since then and had blotted them from view.

So this was what it was like, Pleasure City!

Some of the gigantic blocks were linked by fantastical multi-tiered street-bridges crossing at various levels.

Ave thought that he was looking at a forest mound, which in his homeland was built by little insects with many feet.

This impression of the maritime city of the Superiors was strengthened even further when he and Kutsi Merc were on dry land. They were pushed and jostled by crowds of hurrying Faetians. In addition to the steam-cars, there were vehicles powered by obsolete internal combustion engines. Making an appalling din and poisoning the air, this medley of heterogeneous vehicles surged past the half-asphyxiated Ave or thundered overhead on the crazy bridges between the massive artificial canyons of the buildings. Squeezed into a corner of the tiny lift-cage by other Faetians, Ave and Kutsi were taken up to the tiny room set aside for them in the expensive Palace of Visitors.

While Kutsi Merc unpacked, Ave stood at the lancet window and looked out on an alien world. He could not see any of the old-time romance for which he had yearned since childhood. Everything here was an eyesore, beginning with the uniform of the coarse Blood Guards and ending with the awkward angles of the cramped little room.

"Don't torture your eyes with barbarian

buildings," said Kutsi Merc. "We'll be on the Great Shore tomorrow."

A roundhead servant of low stature appeared and asked whether the new arrivals would prefer vegetable or animal food with blood for dinner, and whether they wanted, like all travellers, to look round the densely populated quarters of the city, and whether they had any other orders for him.

Kutsi Merc considered it necessary to display the traditional curiosity, so he and Ave did not allow themselves time for a rest, but trailed off into the famous roundhead quarters.

Although he knew the slums of his native continent, Ave had never imagined that Faetians could live in such filthy and overcrowded conditions. It was only possible to breathe on a street when it became a suspension bridge. But where the street was hemmed in by buildings and ran between them like a tunnel, it became, as it were, part of the living quarters. Not shy of passers-by, the Faetians kept their doors open, got on with their household chores, sat at the table with children born before the roundheads were banned from having children, ate their simple but acrid-smelling food and went to bed. The Faetesses poked their heads out of the open doors and, shouting loudly, conversed with the inhabitants on the second or third stories up. Here and there, only just above the heads of the passers-by, the inmates' washing had been hung out to dry; most of them did not know whether they would have to sweat at

work on the next day as well.

Ave very much wanted to hold his nose when, accompanied by Kutsi, he fled from those evil-smelling quarters, famed for their openly exhibited poverty. The Power of Justice had only existed for a hundred and three days and it had not been able to help the residents...

"So what's the answer to this?" wondered Ave. "Is it really in the monstrous law of a Dictator who has forbidden these families to have children?"

Was it really to see all this that he had dreamed of coming here from across the ocean ever since childhood?

But next day he saw the Great Shore and Mada.

Chapter Three

THE MASTERS

Dictator Yar Jupi's palace was part of the Temple of Eternity, in which worship had ceased after the Faetians forgot their religion. Now the Dread Wall separated the temple from the monastery buildings that had been converted for the Dictator's use. The soaring spire of black stone resembled a torpedo with a disintegration warhead. The ancient architects never suspected that they were anticipating the outlines of a future weapon. Even less could they have imagined that, in the event of a disintegration war, the cellars under the

Temple of Eternity would house the Central Control Panel of Defence Automaton. The machines could unleash a death-dealing swarm of disintegration torpedoes against Danjab.

A session of Peaceful Space was now being held over these fearsome machines in the former shrine of the temple with its black columns soaring up into the sky. Its chairman was Um Sat of Danjab, who had in his time discovered the disintegration of matter* and had made a terrible mistake by publishing his discovery on both continents simultaneously. The great roundhead, as he was called, and the planet's first authority on matter, had decided that he was as great an authority on life. Believing that the simultaneous appearance of a superpowerful weapon on both continents would create a "balance of fear", he hoped that war would become impossible. However, the tension of the relations between the continents was growing. Um Sat had only hit on one of the causes: overpopulation and hostility because of the lack of room. But the hostility over profits was far more dangerous. Overpopulation was aggravating all aspects of the struggle even further. The proprietors on both continents, while suppressing dissatisfaction of the toilers by force, were also threatening

*By the disintegration of matter, the Faetians meant the nuclear reactions of fission and synthesis, as a result of which, as is known, a deficiency of mass is observed; that is, matter diminishes; it disintegrates, releasing an enormous amount of energy.

one another with force across the ocean. It seemed to them that they could, at the expense of their competitors, not only boost profits, but could pacify the malcontents in their own country with a small handout.

The horrified Um Sat was beginning to realise the inevitability of a disintegration war and he considered himself responsible for it. That is why he was now trying to find a solution for everything in the exploration of new space continents, dreaming about the partial resettlement of Faetians on them and about universal reconciliation.

Heavy responsibility, disillusion, care and fatigue had left their mark on the old Faetian's face. His high forehead under the dense shock of hair was furrowed by deep lines. The big, sad eyes were full of kindly wisdom and understanding. But with it all went a weak chin covered by a greying beard.

In spite of the Sat's tragic mistake, he was still respected for his tremendous achievements in science and for his unquestionable integrity of purpose. Consequently, the sages of learning from both continents met him in the hall with the greatest respect.

But at that moment, within only a hundred paces of the Temple of Eternity, behind the wall of the Lair, there was another world-famous Faetian whom no one respected but all feared.

Yar Jupi became Dictator during the black days when the Power of Justice was suppressed.

Before his daughter was born, he was merely an inconspicuous tradesman who did business with the roundheads. To please his clients, he took Mother Lua into service for Mada, who had lost her mother. The nurse replaced the child's real mother at the memorable time when the fury of the oppressed burst into the open. The uprising shook Powermania, depriving the proprietors of power and possessions.

Lying low in their burning hatred, they refused to reconcile themselves to defeat. They had the brutal experience of struggle amongst themselves. They had always fought to the death with the toilers and with one another. However, they were now ready to forget their own quarrels.

There were proprietors on both sides of the ocean. But since the discovery and settlement of the new continent of Danjab, the Faetians had lived there without the ancient prejudices; there wasn't even any favourable soil on which they could flourish. The result was that, under the new circumstances, both roundheads and longheads began enjoying equal rights and opportunities to make others work for them. Be that as it may, it led to the rapid growth of, if not a culture, at least a technology. The products of the Culturals, as its inhabitants began to style themselves, invariably proved better and cheaper than those of Powermania's barbarians. And the proprietors of Danjab inundated the old continent with their products. In Powermania, crude and primitive means of manufacture

still prevailed. The proprietors of that continent found themselves under threat of ruin. No matter how much they oppressed their toilers, the profits were slipping out of their hands. They came to seethe with hatred for everything from Danjab. Only a defeat in the struggle with the Justice Movement temporarily relegated a reckoning with the overseas proprietors to the background.

When Yar Judi proclaimed his Doctrine of Hatred, he had only heard about the Council of Blood, not suspecting who the members might be. Once, when summoned to a secret meeting of the council in a cellar, he was shaken to recognise, under the cowls of those present, two important workshop proprietors and one big land proprietor.

"Our choice has fallen on you, Yar Judi," declared the land proprietor. "Your Doctrine of Hatred could unite, for nothing unites better than common hatred. With its help, the Movement of Blood should suppress the Movement of Justice. But do not forget that purity of blood," he added significantly, "though regarded as the supreme ideal, is still only a weapon for suppressing the power of the riff-raff."

"The Movement of Blood will justify its name," affirmed Yar Judi, who already considered himself as one of its leaders.

The proprietors exchanged glances.

"We shall deal with the roundheads both here and overseas," said the future Dictator with inspiration.

"You traded with the roundheads, your

wife nursed their children," began a workshop proprietor insinuatingly, and he threw back his cowl. "That is advantageous to us, because, however loudly you may shout about hatred, the overseas proprietors can still trust you most of all for having been able to get on with the roundheads. You will go overseas and convince them that what has happened here will happen to them too. Let them help us to deal with the power of the 'seekers after justice', having thereby preserved their own possessions. Let them send good weapons to the contingents of your cutthroats. You will know how to use it. Both now ... and later. You understand?" And the workshop proprietor pulled the hood with its eyeslits down over his face.

Yar Judi understood everything perfectly. Shrewd and cunning, he made his Doctrine of Hatred the main weapon against the Power of Justice. He even did not hesitate to publicise his maniacal plan for the seizure of the whole planet by the longfaces. The overseas proprietors turned a blind eye to this. It was most important of all for them to help the leader to deal with the hated power of the toilers, and if he also spouted empty phrases about conquests, then let him amuse himself, but he would at least be doing his job.

The ex-tradesman not only fooled the overseas proprietors, he surrounded himself with bands of cutthroats lusting for booty. He distracted the unstable elements from the defence of their own interests by encouraging them to persecute the roundheads. In a

word, he did everything that was required.

The Power of Justice was smashed. Its leaders from among the toilers and also many roundfaced Faetians were exterminated. The continent swam in blood. Yar Judi was carried to the top on a crest of bloody foam.

The Council of Blood made the subtle and obliging shopkeeper Dictator of Powermania, counting on his subservience. No one, apart from him, knew who was a member of the Council of Blood and whose interests it defended.

After dealing with the toilers' revolt, the new Dictator proclaimed all roundheads (mostly toilers) to be inferior citizens. In the name of struggle with overpopulation on the planet, he forbade them to have children. Newborn infants and their parents were threatened with the death penalty. But the roundheads had to labour twice as hard as the rest. The use of overseas products was declared incompatible with the principles of blood. The proprietors of Powermania sighed with relief: their profits were safe.

The overseas proprietors came to their senses too late. Yar Judi not only deprived them of profits on the old continent, but threatened them with a war of disintegration, of total annihilation. They had no option but to prepare for such a war in defence, above all, of their own power and profits.

The military leaders of both sides, fearing a disintegration war, intended to deliver the strike first. To ensure that it would also be the last, they demanded the build-up of

disintegration weapons. The proprietors of both continents, equally demented and camouflaging their intentions behind phrases about a love of peace, compelled their workshops to produce even more frenziedly.

The naive hopes of Um Sat, the great Elder of learning, for a peaceful "balance of fear" came down with a crash and he now began voicing a demand for the total elimination of all reserves of disintegration weapons and a ban on their use. Many sober minds supported him.

In the tense pre-war atmosphere, Yar Judi found himself hearing more and more often the name of Um Sat, who had discovered the secret of the disintegration of matter and was now appealing to the conscience of the Faetians so that it could be "covered up again".

The Dictator received reports of dangerous conversations: "If the roundheads could give the planet a Faetian like Um Sat, then how can they be declared inferior? Why do the roundheads have to work twice as hard as others, but throughout the life of one generation they must yield their place on Faena to the longfaces?"

Yar Judi sensed a threat in these "brazen" questions!

Fearing another Uprising of Justice, the Dictator lost his peace of mind. He fell prey to persecution mania. He no longer left the Lair, where he led an ostentatiously ascetic life. He was equally mistrustful of the roundheads and the longfaces, and even of the

proprietors of the Council of Blood, whom he served and to whom he could become useless.

To appease the people, who were boiling with rage, he stepped up his preparations for a disintegration war, promising that the ban on roundheads having children would be lifted after the successful end of the war and the resettlement of the victors on the overseas continent.

Alongside this, he muffled the discontent of the toilers with adventurist plans for the transfer of the roundheads to the planet Mar, where they would be free of all prohibitions (as if it was simply a matter of resettlement!).

He therefore encouraged the conquest of space and promoted the creation of Space Station Deimo near Mar. The Culturals already had a base there named Phobo. Yar Jupi even agreed to declare Outer Space "peaceful", since the interests of the proprietors clashed mainly on Faena.

However, the great learned Elder Um Sat, who had solved the mysteries of matter, could not fathom the depths of unscrupulous politics. For him, the "problem of overpopulating the planet" really blotted out everything else, although, in fact, it merely aggravated the burdens of the toilers and their struggle with the proprietors, not to mention the hostility of the proprietors amongst themselves. Evidently, in order to be a true Elder, it was still inadequate to be learned in one specific branch of knowledge.

No one had expected to see the cautious and calculating Yar Judi at a session of Peaceful Space. He was too afraid of assassination. Obviously, it was not for nothing that Yar Judi had chosen a place for the session near the Lair. The Temple of Eternity communicated with the former monastery by an underground passage.

During the session, Yar Judi suddenly appeared out of the wall with two impressive robot bodyguards.

He was a tall, well-built Faetian with a long, clean-shaven face, a small dark beard, a hooked nose, a narrow, harsh mouth and suspicious, restless eyes that looked out from under the zigzags of irregular eyebrows. His egg-shaped skull, clean shaven on purpose, was considered to be of impeccable form among the Superiors. There was something bird-like and predatory in the expression on his face.

Yar Judi addressed those present with a pompous speech in which he spoke about the innate striving of the Superiors for peace and about his agreement with the project for resettling Faetians on other planets to avoid war on Faena.

He had brought as a gift to Peaceful Space an interplanetary ship, *Quest*, ready for immediate lift-off together with an experienced astronaut commander; he offered Um Sat the opportunity to lead the expedition to Terr.

Then he announced the Council of Blood's decision to consider Um Sat an "honorary longface" with rights of the Superior

amongst the Superiors. The basis for this was research by the "historians" of Blood, who had established that the name Sat in honour of the planet, marked with a noble ring, was only given to the purest longfaces.

Um Sat was flabbergasted. The expedition to Terr was a reality. On Danjab they had merely been arguing over how much to allocate for an interplanetary ship for Terr, whereas he could now lead such an expedition. But ... that falsification by the "historians"! The Dictator had not disdained to use it so as to take Um Sat from the round-heads. The learned Elder's first impulse was to turn down the Dictator's gifts; anyone else in his place would have acted likewise, but he refrained. After all, he stood for reconciliation, for the settlement of Faetians in space. How could he say no to the Faetians and refuse to survey the planet Terr, which could become their new home? Had he the right to display personal or racial vanity to the detriment of all Faetian society? Would it not be more reasonable to demonstrate the feasibility of space resettlement and divert the interest of the workshop proprietors to building spaceships instead of manufacturing torpedoes for a disintegration war?

In his answering speech, Um Sat controlled himself and expressed his gratitude to Yar Jupi both for the interplanetary ship being handed over to Peaceful Space and for the high rank bestowed on him, Um Sat. He promised to think about the possibility of personally taking part in the expedition.

He despised himself, but considered that he was making a great sacrifice.

The Dictator grinned and vanished through the gap in the wall with his robot bodyguards. Overseas technology never failed.

Um Sat announced an intermission in the work of the Peaceful Space session. He needed to pull himself together and justify himself to himself. Of course, he was still the same roundhead—true, inwardly confused, devastated and now the owner of rights he did not need at all.

But these rights proved particularly necessary to his former pupil and favourite, Ave Mar.

Dobr Mar, Ave's father, the Ruler of Danjab, felt ill at ease in the round office with the vaulted ceiling. He was the nine-hundred-and-sixty-second ruler who had moved in there.

An angular chin and a bony jaw on the intelligent face spoke of will and energy; the fine mouth, turned down at the corners, testified to worry; the bags under the eyes and the balding head with its remnants of greying hair, to a hard life. He had been given the name Dobr (Kind) for his coming-of-age. Until then he had borne his father's name, Terrible Mar, with the addition The Second Junior. The Ruler was thinking of his son on the barbarians' continent, where an explosion could occur at any time...

In spite of himself, there arose in his mind's eye, in all its details, that accursed

day half a cycle ago, when he had decided on an act for which he could now find neither justification nor forgiveness.

The robot secretary reported that Kutsi Merc was in the waiting-room. Since the time when Dobr Mar's predecessor had been shot in that very office by his own secretary, the Grand Circle had decreed that only robot secretaries should work in the Ruler's Palace. And now the "intelligent box" had shown Kutsi Merc on the screen. While waiting to be received, Kutsi had not noticed that he was being watched, but he was naturally alert. A typical roundhead, he had a face like the disc of Lua, Faena's eternal satellite. His narrow eyes were looking sideways at the door.

Relations were complex between Dobr Mar and Kutsi Merc. Only Kutsi knew how the Ruler had come to power. Dobr Mar had formerly been a "friend of the Ruler", and by law had to occupy the "first chair" in the event of his death.

No one abused the "mentally unstable" assassin more than Dobr Mar. He swore to pursue the same foreign policy as the late Ruler: the eternal hostility with Powermania was to be tempered and everything possible should be done to reconcile the planet's two continents and deliver the Faetians from the horrors of war.

Not long before the assassination of Dobr Mar's predecessor, Kutsi Merc had handed him the terrible conditions on which he could become Ruler: he must be the first to start a disintegration war.

Once he had taken his predecessor's place, Dobr Mar was in no hurry to pursue the lunatic policy of the "mortally unstable" who demanded that the war be won with disintegration weapons.

Dobr Mar ruled Danjab, finding work and living accommodation for the ominously growing population. He tried to reduce the tension in relations between the continents, put through a law making old goods subject to destruction so that new ones would be acquired and managed things so that Yar Judi, satisfied by the cut in the import of overseas goods, was even forced to agree to joint actions in space.

...Dobr Mar had guessed why Kutsi Merc had come and what he was going to say. After all, the Ruler had not yet met the "special conditions". And on the eve of the elections, Dobr Mar was afraid of possible denunciations. What if he struck the first blow?

When he went into the office, Kutsi Merc halted. Squat, but well-built and broad-shouldered, almost without a neck, he looked like a wrestler before a match.

The match took place. Dobr Mar went trustingly towards him.

"The councillors of the Grand Circle are troubled by the information obtained by Kutsi Merc to the effect that the barbarians have mastered and even improved on the automatic machines they originally obtained from us, so that they have become dangerous."

"The Ruler is right. The automatic

machines are dangerous. I have a reliable agent in the Lair."

"What guarantee is there that the automatic machines won't function by accident?"

"They're almost the same on Danjab."

"That's not enough! The barbarians must not be allowed to keep them. Such is the decision of the Grand Circle."

"I bow before the will of the first proprietors. But the barbarian automatic machines are under the Lair. Even a snake couldn't get through there."

"A snake couldn't, but Kutsi Merc could. Besides, he has a reliable agent there."

Kutsi Merc understood everything. Dobr Mar needed to show the proprietors that he was carrying out their conditions, and at the same time he could get rid of Kutsi Merc by sending him on an impossible assignment.

After his inevitable failure, Kutsi Merc could no longer prevent Dobr Mar from being re-elected.

Not a line moved on Kutsi Merc's face.

"It is clear," he said respectfully. "Penetrate into the Lair and destroy it and its automatic machines by using a disintegration charge." He thought for a moment and added almost casually, "A reliable cover will be needed."

"Fine," agreed the Ruler, walking round the horse-shoe table and settling himself in the comfortable armchair. Many of his predecessors had used that chair and he intended to keep his place in it for a long time to come.

"The cover would be Ave Mar."

"Ave Mar? My son?" Dobr Mar rose abruptly to his feet.

He turned away to hide his wrath. This experienced spy was playing an unworthy game with him, hoping that the father would not risk his son's life.

Before Dobr Mar had thrice put up his candidature for Ruler and had been defeated for refusing to become the "Ruler's friend", he had been the owner of vast fertile fields. His son Ave had been born in those fields, close to nature. He had been given his name Ave (Welcome) when he reached maturity. As a little boy, he had run around with half-naked children of roundheads working in his father's fields.

He had not only gone fishing with them to help them fill their bellies at least once in a while, he had climbed trees for the nutrient buds, but, like all generations of children, he had played at war.

Dobr Mar was proud of his son, although the boy had inherited his curly hair from his roundhead grandmother and his girlish curved eyelashes and his clear gaze from his mother. The father didn't particularly like his son looking at the world too ecstatically, naively believing in justice and the ancient laws of honour. Life had punished him many times for this old-fashionedness. But the father was flattered that his son worshipped him for his efficiency and love of peace. However, the son sometimes behaved rashly. On leaving his teacher Um Sat, "not

wishing to serve the science of death", he openly spoke up against the fact that the decisive role on both continents was being played by the proprietors of the fields and big workshops who had profited from the overpopulated lands and the labour of those working for the proprietors. Fortunately for him, as his father knew from the secret reports, he never managed to attach himself to the "current under the ice" of young people threatening to break through even here, on Danjab, in a new Uprising of Justice. Ave himself often heard seditious remarks by disciples of the Doctrine of Justice, but he didn't consider it necessary to report them to his father. Ave knew about the secret meetings, the participants in which as in token of greeting used to touch their right eyebrow with their left hand. But he was not admitted to these assemblies. The toilers apparently did not trust him because he was the Ruler's son. It never entered his father's head that Ave Mar's friends could safeguard him as a capable scientist. After leaving Um Sat, Ave devoted himself to the problem of a possible life for the Faetians on other planets. Dobr Mar knew but did not really understand his arguments that the authorities on astronomy were wrong in affirming that life was impossible anywhere except on Faena, since the other planets were either too far away from their star or, like Merc, Ven and Terr, had been incinerated by its rays. The Faetians had nowhere to go if they fled from their own planet, if you

discounted the grim planet Mar, which was hardly capable of supporting life and had been earmarked by the Dictator of the barbarians' continent as a place of exile for roundheads. It turned out that the only means of purging the planet for future generations might be war and war alone. Ave, however, affirmed that the temperatures there were not as high as might be expected from its proximity to Sol, its star. What was decisive was the carbon dioxide content, which created the greenhouse effect, preventing the excess heat radiation into space. This effect made it possible for life to develop on Faena. On its horizon, the star rose solely as the brightest star, whereas on Terr it must have been a blinding disc to look at. Ave held that if there was less carbon dioxide than on Faena, there would be no greenhouse effect, the superfluous heat could be dissipated and any life forms could develop on its surface.

Ave's views were rejected by the experts as absurd. He became disillusioned in the Elders of learning, in the teachings and in himself, lost heart and began to pine away.

His father merely shrugged his shoulders. He would have preferred a son more adapted to life, although he loved and pitied him.

And now Kutsi Merc was demanding a sacrifice... To carry out the task, Dobr Mar must risk his son's life.

Kutsi Merc was certainly calculating that the Ruler would back down, but he was mistaken. The Ruler, too, was cornered.

...As he remembered all this, Dobr Mar, "defender of the right and culture", did not know what to do. He did not know how the operation on Powermania was going to turn out. Would the crazy mission succeed? Would the dangerous Kutsi Merc be eliminated, and would Ave survive?

Chapter Four

THE TEMPLE OF ETERNITY

Every evening, when bright Jupi began shining over the Dread Wall, Mother Lua conducted the alien Ave to her charge.

She kept watch for them with the hunchback, who always accompanied his master. The nurse and the secretary did not get on very well with one another. The hunchback was trying to get Mother Lua to take him somewhere, but she was frightened.

One evening, Ave came into the garden looking downcast.

"What's the matter?" asked Mada in alarm.

Ave Mar confessed that he had to leave the Great Shore on the following day. The travellers were not allowed to stay any longer near the Dictator's palace. Kutsi had spotted that they were being trailed.

The young Faetians, as at their first tryst, were standing in the shadow of the trees. Mada rested her head on Ave's breast and wept. He stroked her hair, not knowing what to say. It was obvious that they loved one

another and could not bear to be apart.

Mada held her head back and looked up at Ave. His curly hair blotted out the stars.

"Everything'll sort itself out," he said reassuringly. "We must use certain of your father's oddities—his attachment to the old customs, for instance. He refers in his teaching to the former monarchs; he even remembers that intermarriage between the children of hostile kings used to stave off war. I'm going to my father. I shall ask him to approach Yar Judi with an offer of alliance between us."

Mada shook her head.

"What? Get married now?" Ave had read her mind.

"Yes. Before you leave."

Mada said this firmly, almost imperiously.

"You mean tonight?" asked Ave, perplexed. "But who's capable of marrying two polar opposites of hostility?"

Mada laughed, although her face was still wet with tears. Ave had an odd way of putting things in a foreign language.

"You just don't know the ways of the Superiors. It's the roundheads that need permission from the authorities to get married. But we longfaces are free. Any of the Superiors whose age exceeds the combined ages of the lovers can pronounce them man and wife."

"But where are we going to find such an elder? Ave is only a guest of the Superiors."

"What does 'guest' mean? Are you helpless to find an answer?"

Ave flared up.

"I was a pupil of Um Sat himself, the first Elder of learning on the planet. He is old enough and he lives here."

"But he's a roundhead," said Mada disappointedly.

"Um Sat has only just been proclaimed 'honorary longface' in Powermania. He is equal to the Superiors amongst the Superiors."

Mada pushed Ave away from her, but clasped his hands in hers as she looked adoringly up at him.

"Hurry to him! You're a true Faetian and you'll be able to convince him."

Bowing low, the hunchback Kutsi Merc conducted the young Faetian into Um Sat's cell.

"Ave Mar? You have returned to your teacher?" said the Elder, half-rising from his chair to greet them.

"Yes, I have—at a most difficult moment in my life."

"You speak as though it were a matter of life or death."

"No!" Ave vigorously shook his head. "Much more. A matter of happiness!"

The Elder looked intently at his pupil's face.

"So that's it! But how can I help?"

"By using the rights bestowed on him by the Council of Blood, Um Sat, by the law of the Superiors, has the right to join together for all time Ave Mar and she whom he loves more than life."

"The clear-thinking Ave Mar has chosen none other than the daughter of Dictator Yar Judi, the beautiful Mada, in spite of the obstacles," interposed Kutsi Merc in the flowery language of Powermania.

"What? Roundhead Sat is to use the rights of the oppressors?" The old man was outraged.

"It is not just a matter of love," interposed Kutsi Merc again. "The marriage of the son and daughter of the rulers of two continents will help to avert a war... That is what Yar Judi says in his teaching."

The cunning Kutsi knew how to convince Um Sat. The Elder became thoughtful.

"He talks sensibly. Though burning with shame, I did not reject the gift of the barbarians solely because I was thinking of how to avoid war."

"Then use your rights and help us to be happy!" responded Ave.

"What must I do?" asked the Elder.

"The ceremony is quite simple. Mada's nurse and Kutsi Merc will be the witnesses."

"Is that enough?" The Elder was amazed.

"Yes, for the age of Um Sat exceeds the combined ages of the lovers, and he has the right to join them in wedlock."

"So the man who created the doctrine of matter, the man who refuted the religions of the past," said the Elder with a smile, "will have to perform almost the function of an unworthy priest..."

"And, what is more, in the shrine of a former temple," interposed Kutsi Merc.

"Then let the marriage truly serve peace and remain a secret for the time being," decided the scientist. "The wedding will be announced when Ave returns to Danjab. May it help the father to come to terms with Yar Judi, if the Dictator is really in the traditions of the ancient monarchs."

"So be it!" announced the hunchback.

"I will persuade my father. He's a politician and won't miss such a chance," said Ave warmly in support. "However, the ceremony absolutely must take place tonight."

"Why the hurry?" said Um Sat with a frown.

"Alas, travellers, even distinguished ones, cannot stay for long near the Dictator's palace. Besides ... it was Mada's request."

"There is no Faetess more beautiful and intelligent! She thinks of everything," commented Kutsi Merc.

"Well, then..." Um Sat shrugged his shoulders. "The shrine is empty. And old men don't need such a lot of sleep."

Ave silently embraced his teacher. Um Sat gazed sadly at him for a long time.

The Blood Door opened once again. Mother Lua, as usual, was waiting for Ave and Kutsi in the half-ruined portico. The three of them went into the ancient monastery garden, lit now by the faint light of Lua. The dangling lianas didn't look like snakes any more, they suggested the cords of costly curtains screening off the garden. The trees resembled colonnaded galleries.

There was a fragrance of rotting leaves and something strange and gentle—perhaps the flowers that Yar Judi used to grow with such passion.

Mada was waiting for her beloved and rushed to meet him as soon as he walked through the Blood Door.

"Has he agreed?"

"Um Sat has so far created reactions of disintegration, but now (may Kutsi Merc be forgiven for this!) he will have to accomplish the opposite," joked the hunchback, and he grinned, but quickly changed the grin into an ingratiating smile.

It had grown dark in the garden. The silver light had faded. Lightning began flashing beyond the outer wall, casting dense black shadows onto the shrubbery. One of the trees seemed to leap out of the darkness and blaze up, its white bark shining.

A bellowing noise came from somewhere far away. It was as if an enormous, lumbering machine had gone out of control and had finally plunged down into an abyss, deafening and blinding all like a disintegration blast.

Mada huddled closer to Ave.

It was now totally dark; the avenue colonnades and the tree with the white bark had disappeared.

"What a thunderstorm!" whispered Mada ecstatically.

"We'll be soaked as we go round the Dread Wall to the Temple of Eternity," observed the hunchback.

"Should we put it off till tomorrow, perhaps?" asked Ave cautiously.

"Never!" exclaimed Mada. "Are we going to be stopped by the thunder of heaven? As for the rain wetting our clothes, my nanny can take care of them."

"Of our clothes?" inquired Kutsi Merc. He held out his hand and felt the first rain-drops fall on to his palm. "Yes, she'll have to take care of them."

"I can do without that care," grumbled Mother Lua. "I'd do better to take you there under cover."

"What d'you mean?" asked Kutsi Merc, suddenly on the alert.

"It's all quite simple," explained Mada. "An old underground passage leads from here to the Temple of Eternity. The priests used it once, but now we're going to walk along it. Nanny knows everything and will open the doors as we come to them."

"Does the passage run from the garden?" inquired Kutsi.

"Yes, we can go into it not far from here. Nanny will show us."

The rain began, a downpour from the start. They all ran, stumbling over the tree roots. Lua went in front, with Kutsi, Mada and Ave following on behind.

"This way! It's no darker here than outside. The old passage isn't much to look at, I'm sorry to say," said Mother Lua as she led them further.

"Still, it's better than in the rain," responded Kutsi.

Ave could smell the damp. When he touched the wall, it was wet and sticky. With the other hand he tightly squeezed Mada's fingers.

"Wait," came Lua's voice from in front. "I must make an effort."

"Does the good lady need a hand in lifting something?"

"I must concentrate."

It turned out that Mother Lua had to use will-power to open a certain door that would obey her brain biocurrents.

The young Faetians saw a bright rectangle in front of them, with Lua and Kutsi sharply silhouetted against it.

Mada and Ave went into a spacious underground, plastic-lined corridor.

"Aha!" said Kutsi Merc. "The ancient priests knew their materials."

"We turn left for the Temple of Eternity."

Kutsi Merc stopped and felt a thick cable in red braiding.

Mada firmly squeezed Ave's fingers in her little hand.

The footsteps of the Faetians rang under the low ceiling.

Ave looked back suspiciously to where the corridor made a turn. The light that had automatically come on when they appeared had already gone out.

Twice the Faetians were confronted by a blank wall, and each time, in response to Mother Lua's mental command, the barrier disappeared to let them pass through.

"I wouldn't like to be left here without

our companion," commented Kutsi Merc.

"Has the visitor from Danjab no more to say than that?" said Lua reproachfully.

The secret passage had branches, but Lua confidently walked past them, leading the others along a route with which she was thoroughly familiar.

Finally, she stopped again before a blank wall and looked intently into the centre of a spiral ornament. This was enough for the wall to divide, and Lua let the young Faetians go first with Kutsi Merc, then went into the familiar shrine herself.

Mada huddled closer to Ave. She had not been scared of going along the underground passage, but the ancient temple with its shrine and a roof that disappeared into unseen heights had a disturbing effect on her imagination.

Something stirred in the semidarkness and a voice rang out:

"I welcome the happy ones! I guessed that because of the bad weather you would use the tunnel by which the Dictator of Powermania came to the session."

Mada Jupi looked in agitation at the tall figure of the great Elder of learning, who was standing on a dais. She thought of the High Priest of the temple who used to deliver his invocations from that spot. And his voice had echoed under the dark vaults then as now, when Um Sat began addressing the young Faetians.

The Elder of learning tactfully performed a rudimentary wedding ceremony, ending it with the words:

"So be it!"

His voice echoed and re-echoed in the depths of the shrine, as if the ancient priests were chanting the responses.

Then Um Sat embraced each of the young Faetians and wished them happiness.

Ave wanted to take his leave of Mada, but Kutsi intervened, exchanging significant glances with Mother Lua.

"Isn't it worth going by the underground passage so as to see the young bride off? She will let us out through the Blood Door."

"Through our Blood Door!" said Mada, looking at Ave.

Mother Lua stood meekly beside Kutsi, as if entirely dependent on him.

And again Ave acted apparently of his own volition, expressing his willingness to go by the underground passage.

Mother Lua heaved a sigh. She had devoted her whole life to ensure that Mada took after her mother and not her father. What lay in store for the girl?..

Kutsi Merc was content and did not hide it.

Chapter Five

BLOOD

Yar Alt, Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard, was proud that, on his coming-of-age, his strength of character had earned him the name of his maternal uncle, Yar Jupi himself.

He lived up to his nickname in the contingents of the Blood Guard, to which he had

been appointed by the Dictator. Coarse, hot-tempered, ready to strike and even to kill, he despised the views of others and could not bear objections.

That was why the Dictator had given him the more important assignments. And it had certainly not been by chance that Yar Alt had met on board ship the son of Danjab's Ruler arriving with his secretary. Camouflaging himself with the rudeness typical of the security officers, he had been "checking" the new arrivals, having decided not to let them out of sight.

Finally, as Yar Alt had been expecting, the young Faetians and their companions entered the shrine through a gap in the wall.

During the improvised wedding ceremony under the temple vaults, apart from the nanny and the secretary, there had been one invisible witness. He had been unable to suppress a groan, as if echoing, like the officiating priests, the Elder's cry:

"So be it!"

Yar Alt had failed to win "full psycho-life contact" from Mada, while this foreign half-breed had achieved it without effort. In the depths of his soul, Yar Alt considered that he could have become a totally different Faetian if his love had been reciprocated. Tenderness, sensitivity and goodness would have blossomed in him if the beautiful long-face of his choice had not responded to him with proud disdain. That was why Yar Alt had come to hate the world.

And now, in fear and shame at having

groaned aloud, he kept himself in hand so as to carry out his duty.

He waited until Mother Lua led the newly-weds and the hunchback into the secret passage, watched as Um Sat retired to his cell, and only after that did he risk going to the hidden door. He strained all his will as he ordered the wall to divide. And he sighed with relief. The wall parted to form an opening. Yar Alt dived through it.

The criminals shouldn't have gone far. The biocurrents of the Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard were effective. He would find the intruders while they were still underground and not give them a chance to shelter in the palace.

He ran along the passage, but the cursed lamps were coming on and going out again of their own accord. He stopped, realising that they would give him away. All it needed was for one of the party to look round...

If only the lovers could have suspected what they were walking past! The galleries of the Central Console! The heart of the disintegration war!

Why hadn't the alarm gone off? Or was it all because of the brain biocurrents of the roundhead woman whom the automatic machines recognised as friendly, just as they recognised him, the Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard?

So reasoned Yar Alt as he hurried in pursuit of the departing group. Suddenly, he stopped abruptly.

To one side, a gallery sloped steeply down-

wards; along it ran a cable in red braiding. It seemed to Yar Alt that the light had just gone out in this gallery, which certainly didn't lead to the Dictator's palace. Had the hunchback turned off for the Central Console? Why?

Yar Alt caught his breath. Enemies were sneaking up to the Console! It was not just a matter of purity of blood, but of a threat to the whole of Powermania!

Without another thought, Yar Alt also turned off into the gallery and ran headlong down the slope. He was blocked by a blank wall. The light switched itself on and a spiral, the symbol of the Superiors, became visible on the smooth surface.

Yar Alt had never been here before and did not know whether he would be able to open the door in the Wall. Terror and fury made the force of his gaze ten times stronger as he fixed it on the spiral. The moment before the automatic machines began working seemed agonisingly long. But the Wall divided. His status as Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard had helped. The biocurrents of his brain were familiar to these machines too.

Yar Alt rushed through the gap.

After a short while, he saw the secretary and the nanny walking ahead of him.

He drew a pistol loaded with poisoned bullets. Even a light scratch would stun a man.

Without warning, Yar Alt fired at the hunchback from behind. Kutsi started, but stayed on his feet. The bullet had ricocheted

off his hump into the wall.

Alt fired again and yet again. The shock of the bullets threw the secretary onto his knees this time.

Yar Alt slowly walked up, waiting for his enemy to breathe his last.

But the other, who was lying on his back, suddenly kicked the weapon out of Yar Alt's hand. It clattered over the flagstones.

Alt flung himself on the enemy as he struggled to get up and tried to pin the hunchback down to the floor.

Kutsi Merc was unarmed. He had intentionally not brought a weapon with him, anticipating possible searches which could have ruined his whole plan. Endowed with exceptional strength, he would easily have coped with a lighter opponent had it not been for the heavy burden on his back.

Yar Alt drew a long stiletto that served him as a personal antenna in the Blood Guard communications system. Embracing the hunchback with one arm and breathing heavily into his face, he drove the stiletto into his back. But the point slid over something solid, slitting the cloth.

Yar Alt thought only of bullet-proof armour and of nothing else. This spelled disaster, and not only for him.

Almost without hope of success, Yar Alt stabbed his foe in the chest. Strange to say, the hunchback had no frontal armour. The stiletto went straight into Kutsi's heart. His grip loosened and he fell backwards. A pool of blood spread over the stones.

Yar Alt jumped to his feet and prodded the hunchback with his foot. Only then did he turn to Mother Lua.

But she was not there. She had snatched up Alt's pistol and disappeared during the brief struggle so as to warn Mada and save her life.

Yar Alt ran forward and immediately came up against the blank Wall. He fixed a malignant glare on the centre of the spiral, but it never budged. Yar Alt realised that Mother Lua was standing on the other side of the door and by effort of will was commanding the door not to open. That was why the automatic machines were not reacting to his own command!

A struggle began between Yar Alt and Mother Lua. Separated by a solid barrier, they glared furiously at the centres of the two spirals. The programmed machines were paralysed by the opposing wills.

Yar Alt was bathed in drops of sweat and his lips were flecked with foam.

It had been easier to kill Kutsi Merc than to cope with this damned witch. He knew that she composed forbidden songs. Her kind had once been burned at the stake.

Finally, the Wall shuddered and parted to leave a gap, but slammed shut again. Yar Alt just managed to catch sight of the nanny. Fortunately, it hadn't occurred to her to shoot at him. At the mere thought of this, Yar Alt's skin crawled. He had not noticed how exhausted she had been.

The Wall shuddered and was still by turns. Yar Alt ground his teeth. Mother Lua's mis-

take had suggested a plan of action. He wanted very little now: it was for a gap to open for only a fraction of a second. He himself would not, of course, be in front of it.

The perspiration streamed into his eyes. In a wild frenzy, he continued drilling the centre of the spiral with his eyes, commanding the Wall to open. He made ready, drawing his left arm back in order to throw the stiletto.

Mother Lua was almost losing consciousness. Her arms hung helplessly by her sides. She knew her own life and that of her favourite depended on her will-power.

The nanny swayed. The Wall opened just a little way. Yar Alt waited for the right moment and hurled his stiletto through the gap. It pierced the roundhead woman in the throat. Her eyes went blank and the Wall divided.

Yar Alt jumped over the fallen nanny. He tugged the stiletto out of her throat and started racing down the corridor. After a few strides he suddenly realised that he had not retrieved his pistol from Mother Lua. He was about to go back, but changed his mind, hurrying to catch up with Ave Mar and Mada. The traitress who had led the evildoer towards the Central Console had already received her deserts!

Yar Alt ran along the underground passage and the lighting went on as he approached and went out again behind him.

The Wall directly before the palace barred

his way once again, but opened as soon as he glanced at the spiral.

He was now in the palace. The monastery building, reconstructed for the Dictator, still bore the features of the old architecture. Low vaulted ceilings, slit windows from floor to ceiling.

The rooms were sumptuously decorated for ceremonial assemblies that were no longer held for fear that the Dictator might be assassinated.

Yar Alt knew how to get through to Mada's chambers. Subtle taste and a woman's hand had completely transformed the austere cells and oratories. Yar Alt burst into one that had been decorated with pale blue fabric and silver cords, and it was there that he found Ave and Mada.

Mada was doing her hair. Beside herself with fury, she turned round and stamped her foot.

"How dare you burst in on me, you despicable robot of the Guard?"

Yar Alt showered Mada with threats.

"Silence, you boor!" exploded the furious Ave Mar, drawing himself up to his full height.

Mada shielded him with her body.

"Get out of here, you filthy robot! You're not worth a hair of my husband's head!"

"Husband?" Yar Alt bellowed with offensive laughter. "They are no longer alive, the unscrupulous witnesses of your ignominious ceremony under cover of which the enemies of the Superiors planned to wipe out our continent!"

"Blood on your hands and slander on your tongue—that is all you stand for! What can you know of goodness, love and nobility?"

Yar Alt pushed Mada roughly out of the way and hurled himself with his stiletto on the unarmed Ave. The other fended him off with a kick. As he fell, Alt seized hold of Mada and tried to stab her.

Ave Mar gripped his arm and twisted it so that the weapon tore Yar Alt's own tunic.

Yar Alt was an experienced fighter. Ave Mar was an experienced athlete. They locked in combat, rolling about the ancient oratory and leaving a trail of bloodstains on the carpet.

Mada stared transfixed and could not tell whose blood it was. Ave Mar's face was smeared all over with it.

Yar Alt stabbed Ave several times, but could not draw his hand far back enough for the fatal blow. Ave Mar sprang to his feet, seized a heavy chair and hurled it at his opponent. The other tried to dodge it, but a leg caught him on the head and he fell onto the floor. He nevertheless managed to draw back the stiletto, taking aim for a throw at Mada.

Ave Mar struck Yar Alt on the temple. His enemy was flung backwards, but threw out his legs and locked them round Ave's ankles. Turning with a jerk, he threw Ave to the floor, then, getting up onto his knees, raised the stiletto. Ave knocked the weapon out of his hand.

Two shots rang out in succession. Mother Lua crawled through the door, a pistol danc-

ing in her hand. Yar Alt reached for his stiletto again to finish Ave off.

Mada rushed to Lua, snatched the weapon out of her failing hand and pressed the firing button. Yar Alt jerked convulsively, slumped, and lay still.

"He loaded it with poisoned bullets himself," gasped Mother Lua. "My dear, what will become of you?.."

Ave Mar rose to his feet and, breathing heavily, looked in amazement at the body of his adversary and at the unperturbed Mada. But she suddenly threw the pistol aside with revulsion.

"Blood! Blood!" she said in despair. "Now there can only be death. They will tear you to pieces, my husband. No one will believe it was I who did this."

Ave Mar himself couldn't believe it as he stared in bewilderment at his bloodstained hands.

Chapter Six

NO HAPPINESS IN THIS WORLD

Mada Jupi was, of course, a pampered child. Her every wish was fulfilled, she was glorified and bowed down to. But she had nevertheless not become spoiled and capricious, or incapable of doing anything but give orders. Mother Lua, who preserved the wisdom of the people, had managed after the death of Mada's mother to inspire the

girl with the idea of equal rights for all Faetians, whatever their outward appearance. Restrained, always calm, Mother Lua had the rare talent of the story-teller and an innate gift of influencing the minds of others. In another country, at another time, Mother Lua would have been the pride of the people; but on the barbarian continent of Powermania's Superiors she was only a nanny—true, of the Dictator's daughter. She had always held up the girl's own mother as an example, convincing her that the daughter should follow suit.

Mada grew up resembling her mother, but she also took after her father to some extent. Perhaps in her ability to love and hate to extremes. Consequently, the meeting with Ave swept her right off her feet. She fell in love, and a soft tenderness was combined with ruthless determination, and bewilderment with irrepressible daring. She had shot Yar Alt as if he were a mad beast, yet she was dismayed at the sight of his body.

The nanny was dying. Mada kneeled in front of her, listening as she whispered something almost inaudible.

"Nanny is talking about her son. And she says that Yar Alt murdered Kutsi."

"Where? How?"

But Mother Lua could not say any more. Her strength had ebbed away. No efforts on Mada's part were of any avail, neither the kiss of life nor heart massage. The nanny's eyes closed and her body stretched out. The hand that Mada had been holding began

to turn cold. There was no pulse any more.

"It's the end," said Mada, and she burst into tears.

Ave now saw his companion as a weak and helpless girl. Like a child, she shook her nurse, kissed her cold hands and tried to wake her up.

Finally she turned her tear-stained face to Ave.

"My nanny is dead. She was so kind and clever! And we are finished." And she glanced at Yar Alt's contorted body. "Just think! He was my cousin."

"Maybe we should try and help him!"

Mada shuddered.

"The bullets were poisoned. I don't know how my poor nanny came by his pistol." She began sobbing again.

Ave decided that he must do something. He lifted up the dead Alt, who had stiffened in his last convulsions, and carried him into a corner of the room behind the curtains.

Mada stood up determinedly and threw her head back.

"It's no use. The Guards will be here soon, and then my father." She picked Alt's pistol up off the floor. "Forgive me for taking charge of our last step. There is no need to fire a bullet. One scratch is enough. Death will be instant. We shall hold hands with a bullet in our palms. We shall leave this world in which there is no happiness for us."

Ave looked into her face: determination in her was struggling with despair.

Mada took the last round out of the pistol. The bullet was silvery and its sharp prickles were brown where the poisonous coating had been applied.

Ave resolutely gripped Mada's hand.

"No! Faetians don't give in so easily. We can still renounce life, but happiness... No!"

"There is no happiness in this world," replied Mada.

"Show me the way into the garden," said Ave masterfully, "and then through the Blood Door."

"You think we can flee somewhere? Dawn is near, the last in our life. Can you hear the birds singing? I shall follow you because you are my husband. But we shall take the prickly bullet with us. It will be a safe protection for us."

"Lead the way," urged Ave.

Mada looked at him curiously. Until now, she had thought herself the stronger.

They carried Lua's body to a couch and Mada spread over it a pale blue coverlet from her bed. Then she showed Ave a low door leading into a narrow passage that ended in a steep ladder.

Just before dawn, the garden had changed completely. A silvery cloud had filled the avenues, hiding the bushes and tree-trunks from view. It seemed to Ave that he and Mada were walking into another world above the clouds. He clasped her slender hand more tightly.

The quivering mist at their feet seemed treacherous, weightless and yet dense. It was

as if there might be water under it one moment and an abyss the next.

Mada stepped fearlessly into the swirling mist and took Ave with her. The obedient Blood Door opened in front of her.

A dense mist had enveloped the ruins of the old shrine under the Dread Wall. As they walked breast-high through the cloud that lay on the stones, Ave and Mada seemed to be fording a river of foam.

Mada knew the way. They came surprisingly soon to the black building of the Temple of Eternity. Ave thought that the unfortunate Kutsi must have led them the long way round. Poor wretch! It cost Ave an effort to restrain himself; he did not even allow himself a sigh, but he felt sorry for the man.

Ave despised his own habitual changes of mood. But now he was firm and knew what had to be done. That was why he was taking Mada to Um Sat.

The Elder was astounded when he saw the newly-weds on the threshold of his cell once again.

He gave Mada a seat in an armchair opposite the table at which he had spent the whole night. Ave stood beside Mada.

"What's happened? Can I help you in any way?"

"There is no happiness in this world," cried Ave. "But in your power there is another world!"

The Elder raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"There is another world in space," ex-

plained Ave, and he told the Elder all about what had happened.

Um Sat became thoughtful.

"So I must accept Yar Judi's conditions and, in my turn, demand that he send his daughter to Terr? Doesn't that seem incredible? To take refuge in space?"

"But that would mean salvation not only for me and Ave," intervened Mada. "It would be the fulfilment of a dream: to help the Faetians, to find them a new world. Nanny and Mother were thinking about it. Not only Ave and I, but all of us could be happy there. It's not just for myself that I'm ready to fly to Terr. That's what I'm going to tell my father."

Mada understood global problems in no way more deeply than Um Sat.

"What duties as an astronaut can Mada carry out?" asked Um Sat sternly.

"I am a Sister of Health. We are needed everywhere. And not only for the children."

"That's true," agreed Um Sat. "Ave Mar, you will stay here, no one is going to look for your secretary. Mada must go to her chambers and lock herself in. Ave, see your young wife as far as the Dread Wall. It's a good thing that you both look on the trip to Terr as an exploit, not just as an escape."

After their departure, the Elder sat for a while in reflection. Then he summoned several sages of learning who had arrived for the session. They filled his cell. Many of them were roundheads, but there were longfaces

as well. As they came in, each touched his right eyebrow with his left hand. When the cell was packed full, Um Sat asked if he should fly from Faena on the eve of possible events for which, in the name of Justice, the toilers and their friends had been preparing for so many cycles.

After all, he was an adherent of the struggle against the proprietors on both continents, although he had not fully fathomed its depths.

Those present decided unanimously that Um Sat, the personification and pride of learning on Faena, should go into space to find the continents that the Faetians needed. Many of them considered that in this way they would best safeguard the life of the great Elder, but no one said anything about it to him.

Um Sat threw his hands apart. He must submit to the general decision. He had now received the right to act.

When Ave returned, Um Sat called the Dictator's secretary over the closed TV. The screen lit up and the slits of the secretary box glittered on it.

"Dictator Judi, most illustrious of the illustrious, consents to receive the honorary longface Um Sat and is sending an escort for him," announced the box, which had been programmed to speak in the old style. The screen went blank.

"What?" whispered Ave Mar. "Go into the Lair? Doesn't this mean that Yar Judi wants to take a hostage?"

The Elder smiled sadly.

"The risk is not so great."

An officer of the Blood Guard soon appeared in the cell. Ave's blood froze. Before him stood the living Yar Alt.

The caller bowed to the Elder, glanced casually at Ave and said pompously:

"The greatest of the great, the Dictator Yar Judi, gave you the right, honorary long-face, to enter his presence. I have been sent to escort you to the palace."

Ave Mar had the impression that even the Blood Guard officer's voice was the same as Alt's. Had he really come back from the dead? Perhaps the paralysis caused by the bullet had only been temporary. But why didn't he rush at Ave the way he had done in Mada's room?

The officer of the Blood Guard merely glanced indifferently again at Ave Mar and bowed to him.

"In the name of the most illustrious Dictator, I bear apologies to the honoured guest."

As soon as the officer of the Blood Guard and Um Sat had gone out, Ave Mar rushed to the door of the cell. To his amazement, it was unlocked. Only then did Ave Mar realise that the officer's face had been innocent of a scar.

Dictator Yar Judi was waiting impatiently for Um Sat. Omnipotent by grace of the Blood Council, capable in favour of the proprietors of sending millions of Faetians to their death and ready to unleash a disin-

tegration war at any moment, he was powerless to safeguard the one life that was the most dear to him.

Yar Judi was a complicated person. He understood extremely well whom he was serving and how. After losing his wife in his time, he had come to hate the roundheads from whom she had contracted a fatal disease while nursing them. This hatred had finally found expression in a barefaced doctrine which it was impossible to believe, but which proved convenient to the proprietors from the Blood Council. Now, at the height of power, when he was ostensibly leading the life of an ascetic in voluntary seclusion, love for his daughter had become the only ray of light to Yar Judi. Everything else was darkness: fear for his own life, terror of a war which he was nevertheless preparing himself, terror also of the toilers and of his own masters who were ready to get rid of him.

The thing that mattered to him most now was Mada's safety. She was the only one he would want to save from among the millions of doomed.

But how?

And so, in fulfilment of the complex plan that had occurred to him, he had appeared unexpectedly during a session of Peaceful Space in the Temple of Eternity. And now Um Sat was due to arrive.

The officer of the Blood Guard, Yar Alt's brother, handed Um Sat over to two security robots which led the sage of learning through low-ceilinged, sumptuously furnished halls.

Um Sat glanced out of the corner of his eye at his unwieldy bodyguards or escorts with their cubic heads and hooked, scaly manipulators.

In one of the rooms, a box with glittering slits in it, just like the one that the Dictator used, said with programmed floweriness in the impeccable ancient manner:

"Um Sat, honorary longface, may pass through the door in front of him, on the other side of which there awaits him the most blissful meeting with the greatest of the great, the most brilliant of the brilliant, Yar Judi, Dictator of the continent of the Superiors."

The door opened of its own accord, the robot security guards fell behind and Um Sat went into the grim, empty dungeon with the grey walls.

Yar Judi, bearded, hook-nosed, with a shaven skull and upslanting eyebrows, rushed to meet the visitor, riveting him with a piercing, half-mad stare.

"Does Um Sat realise what honour and trust has been afforded him?" he shouted.

"Yes, so be it," sighed the Elder. "Though I be unworthy of such honour, I may be trusted."

"I am going to talk as Superior to Superior, the more so since you are famous for your mind," said the Dictator more calmly this time.

According to the ritual, the guest was supposed to reply that his brains were below comparison with the divine and enlightened

intellect of Yar Judi, but Um Sat calmly said:

"I shall converse with the Dictator Yar Judi as an Elder of learning with a politician, striving to understand and be understood."

Yar Judi started, his nose twitched and his face was distorted by a nervous grimace. He looked sideways at a niche under the window. There were wonderful flowers standing in it. Their tender, dark-blue corollas with the golden sprinkling of the finest stars, each with up to six petals, looked down, dangling on bowed stems.

This was a miracle, bred by the nurserymen on the orders of Yar Judi, a passionate lover of flowers. But it was not their evening beauty that attracted him. The submissive horticulturalists had managed to breed a vegetable miracle, or rather monster, which exuded an aroma that was poisonous, however gentle it might seem. Any Faetian who inhaled it was stricken down with a fatal disease. More than once, rare visitors to this study, excessively independent-minded comrades-in-arms, received by the Dictator with unexpected warmth, sometimes even a few of his over-discontented masters, the big proprietors, had been privileged to sniff the greatest of all treasures. On returning home, they had died in agony without suspecting why.

Needless to say, a reliable ventilation system was sucking the dangerous scent out of the room.

"Well?" asked the Dictator nervously.

"After thinking it over all night, I have decided to accept your offer and lead the expedition to the planet Terr."

Yar Judi started and sighed with relief.

"Um Sat, having become an honorary longface, you confirm your wisdom. I shall glorify this on both continents. However, yesterday in the Temple of Eternity, I had in mind one stipulation which you will have to observe."

"I also wanted to add a condition to my consent to head the expedition."

"I can't bear it when conditions are imposed on me," said the Dictator, raising his voice slightly.

"It is rather the first practical step to complementing the space crew."

"I shall complement the space crew with longfaces, the most worthy of the worthy."

"Perhaps Dictator Yar Judi will remember yesterday's promise to include any of the longfaces in the crew."

"I confirm that, even if it means my daughter."

"The daughter of Dictator Yar Judi?" Um Sat was truly astonished. It had never even entered his head that the Dictator himself would talk about her first.

"Do you dare to regard my daughter as ballast on the flight when she is a Sister of Health?" said Yar Judi, raising his voice.

Both men fell silent, studying each other. No matter how clever he might be, it had never occurred to Um Sat that the Dictator

had thought of saving his daughter from the horrors of a disintegration war by sending her on a space expedition; and however cunning and crafty Yar Judi might be, he could not have presumed that Um Sat had come to him solely in order to obtain his consent to his daughter's flight to Terr.

"So you don't want her to fly?" demanded Yar Judi ominously. "You're worried about her? I appreciate that. Would you care to go over to those flowers? They are beautiful, are they not? Have you ever seen the like? Savour their aroma!.."

"I have never seen anything more beautiful than the daughter of Dictator Yar Judi. Have no doubt that she will be the fairest flower on Terr..."

"Then we shall leave those blossoms in peace," interrupted Yar Judi curtly.

Chapter Seven

THE FORGOTTEN HUMP

The body of Kutsi Merc was lying in a damp underground passage behind blank walls with a spiral ornament.

The casing of the artificial hump had been pierced and the air was entering it, slowly destroying the safety fuse.

No one on Faena, however, had an inkling of this danger on the day of the ceremonial farewell to the astronauts leaving for the planet Terr.

The expedition consisted of three Culturals and three Superiors, one of the latter being Mada Jupi.

For the toilers in the fields and workshops of Powermania, the day of the send-off was declared a public holiday so that the Faetians could go out on the road all the way as far as Cape Farewell, as the Dictator had named part of the Great Beach near the cosmodrome. This was the usual point of departure for all space probes, and also for the ships of the Superiors who were maintaining contact with Space Station Deimo. The proprietors hoped to gain considerable profits from the possible colonisation of the planets and were not parsimonious with their outlays.

Mada and Ave could not escape the feeling that they would soon find themselves being pursued. They were riding in the same steam-car as Um Sat. The old scientist was pensive and sad.

The young members of the expedition kept either looking back over their shoulders or looking intently at the Faetians who flashed past, standing on either side of the road and throwing flowers under the wheels of the car. There were roundheads and longfaces among them. They stood closely packed side by side, as if there were no distinction between them. For many Faetians, a joint expedition of the two continents to a planet was a symbol of peace and inspired them with the hope that it might be possible not only to come to terms on Faena and avoid a war,

but to send part of the population to other planets.

Many Faetians had come out onto the road with their children.

The Faetian landworkers were conspicuous with their dark suntan. Those who toiled in the workshop buildings had earthy complexions. But particularly noticeable were the Faetians from the deep mines. The coal-dust had so ingrained itself into their pores that their skin seemed dark, as if they were of another race and were neither longfaces nor roundheads.

Mada had withdrawn wholly into herself, depressed by what was happening. Like a true Faetess, she evaluated everything through the images near to her. She hardly remembered her own mother, but her nanny was to her a symbol of everything that she was leaving behind on Faena. She felt troubled because happiness lay ahead of her, whereas here... She shut her eyes tight.

When she opened them again, she saw that the road had reached the ocean. She looked at Ave, and her expression spoke volumes.

Ave had been thinking all the time about the Faetians standing by the roadside. Tomorrow they would return to workshops filled with the noise of lathes and the reek of oil. They would take up their stations by moving belts conveying the frames of machines in the process of stage-by-stage assembly, and they would stay there with no hope of Justice, compulsorily and joylessly toiling to the end of their hopeless days.

Ave Mar knew that on his shoulders lay the responsibility for the outcome of the space flight and how much it meant to all these deprived people.

Millions of these Faetians were also dreaming of happiness and the right to have children, whatever shape their heads might be. The means of annihilation alone must no longer be taken from the civilised world. Faena could not exist like that!

Um Sat was thinking sadly about the same thing. He was reflecting that the laws governing life of the whole community of the Faetians must evidently be understood like the laws of nature. The most serious mistake, apart from the discovery and promulgation of the means of disintegrating matter, was that, having lived until old age, he did not understand those laws. Why, for example, were the Faetian toilers creating with their hands not only what was needed to all for life, but also that which was capable of cutting that life off? Why did these crowds now seeing them off tolerate the power of a maniac who had made war his goal in life? Yar Jupi had now conceived the idea of making a grand gesture, of sending out an expedition to look for new "space continents". But how would the settlers live out there? According to the former laws of Faena, taking injustice and the threat of wars into space? No, true wisdom was in seeking not only new planets to inhabit, for which even Yar Jupi was prepared, but new laws by which to live that would scare the daylight out of him. Only

why had the half-crazed Dictator let his daughter go out into space so easily? It was no picnic, after all!..

As he compared one detail with another, the old sage of learning suddenly came to the frightening conclusion that the Dictator might be trying to save his daughter from an imminent disintegration war on Faena.

He looked in a different light at the crowds of Faetians who were seeing him off. Would he ever see them again?

Mada pressed Ave's hand and looked round eloquently. Ave understood her fears...

Her alarm was not unfounded... Much had indeed been discovered in the Dictator's palace.

Grom Alt, the brother of the dead Yar Alt, had stumbled on the trail. This was the Grom Alt who had escorted Um Sat to the Dictator.

The officer of the Blood Guard noticed a dark streak on the floor running from the Blood Door to Mada Judi's chambers, to the underground passage. Grom Alt was of too humble a rank to use the "blood" passage. But he decided that at all costs he must check what that stain was. He scraped up a sample of the dried substance and hurried to the laboratory.

His hands shook when, in secret from the others so as not to share his discovery with anyone, he established the composition of the test, a method taught to Blood Guard officers while at school, where skillful use

was made of foreign science.

He was so agitated that his hair became damp, although it was almost standing on end. He had established that the stain on the floor was blood!

He hesitated to report his discovery to the Dictator, especially since Mada had shown up and had seen her father. True, she had not been accompanied by her nanny as usual. If something had happened, she could have told the Dictator herself. But after his meeting with her, Yar Judi had been aloofly solemn. He had proclaimed a historical decision that had left the whole palace and after that the whole continent dumbfounded, then delirious with joy. The whole leadership had choked with effusions in which they had pointed out to the ordinary people that the Wisest of the Wise was also the most Fearless of the Valiant, prepared even to risk his beloved daughter's life for the welfare of the Faetians, thinking of their distant future and also of universal progress and of peace between the continents.

The obsequious joy in the Dictator's palace impeded Grom Alt's investigation. Everyone he met could talk about nothing except the exploit of Yar Judi and his daughter.

In such an atmosphere, it was positively dangerous to draw anyone's attention to a bloodstain that could cast a shadow on Mada, who had been pronounced heroine of the day. Grom Alt found it particularly suspicious that Mada had not left the Blood Door to her chambers open and that her nanny had

still failed to show up.

He decided to consult his brother, even if it meant sharing the honour of the possible discovery with him. But Yar Alt had disappeared.

It could be that Yar Jupi had sent his trusted Supreme Officer on some mission, as often before.

Grom Alt decided to act at his own risk. While Mada, amid sobs and compliments, was being seen to the cosmodrome, Grom Alt, who had remained behind on duty, went to the girl's chambers. The Blood Door was locked, but not by automatic machines this time. All he needed was the skeleton key which he had been taught to use in the Blood Guard school. Grom Alt went cautiously into the pale-blue room.

He not only found the body of Mada's nanny lying on the couch, but that of his own brother.

A poisoned bullet!

Yar Alt's pistol was lying nearby. Such a weapon could only have been carried by the Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard.

Grom Alt examined the weapon. There were no bullets left in it. His brother was not the kind of Faetian to have had only one round left in the magazine and to have used it on himself. On whom had the others been used?

With mixed feelings of regret and disgust, Grom Alt looked at his brother's cold body. They had never been good friends in his lifetime. Yar Alt had forever oppressed his

younger brother. And now there he was, lying dead at Grom Alt's feet, thereby giving him a foothold on the next rung of the career ladder.

Grom Alt was so pleased with his comparison of the corpse to a rung on the ladder that he could not withhold himself and set his foot on the body, but promptly jerked it away again and hurried out of the nauseating room into the garden, then straight to the Dictator.

It was not easy getting through to Yar Judi, in spite of the shocking news that Grom Alt was bringing him.

The impartial secretary box would understand nothing. Feelings did not exist for it, and the security robots and the door automatic machines of the Dictator's study were controlled solely by that brainless box.

To tell the truth to the box would mean a refusal for sure, because the stupid machine would promptly record in its memory all the circumstances of the affair and send it for investigation to the officers of Criminal Investigation, who hated the officers of the Blood Guard. They would risk reporting the incident to the Dictator only after the findings of the Criminal Investigation officers who, of course, would squeeze Grom Alt out of the picture.

That was why Grom Alt decided to lie to the secretary box, inventing a version according to which he had a most important message for the Dictator; it had been given to him by

Mada Jupi in person on the way to Cape Farewell. After all, she was his cousin!

"You may give me the gist of the beautiful Mada's words," jabbered the box, which was packed full with electronic circuits. "The Greatest of the Great will study it when he checks my daily entries."

"I have nothing to tell you, meritorious guardian of memory. I must deliver a certain object to the Greatest of the Great, the most Illustrious of the Illustrious. If you, as a guardian of memory, could take this object to the Greatest of the Great, I would be at peace."

The confounded box resisted for a long time, but gave way in the end.

The secretary box impartially reported to the Dictator that Grom Alt, officer of the Blood Guard, begged to be received without use of the screen.

The Dictator was very busy. He had held a conference of the higher military ranks who, of course, were not admitted to his presence but simply attended on the monitor screens in his office. On the eve of the disintegration war, no one had access to Yar Jupi. He feared his masters from the Blood Council perhaps more than his subordinates.

The conference ended at last.

"Officer of the Blood Guard Grom Alt," creaked the secretary box, "you may pass through the door to genuflect before the most Illustrious of the Illustrious."

The agitated Grom Alt went into the Dic-

tator's unprepossessing office, afraid to raise his head and look at the face of the man who had invented the Doctrine of Hatred. Like his brother, he aped the Dictator's external appearance in every way.

According to the ritual, Grom Alt genuflected and, staring at the floor, told in a trembling voice about the trail of blood leading into the beautiful Mada's chambers and about the bodies he had found in there.

"Despicable robot of the guard! What are you drivelling about?"

"May your wrath descend on the foul murderers who plotted evil against you and your incomparable daughter, and whose traces I was able to uncover. I grieve over my brother's fate and am happy that your daughter did not become a victim of the villainous conspiracy."

"Conspiracy?" roared the Dictator, and he quivered from head to foot.

He stood with clenched fists and glared with crazed eyes at the terrified officer, who did not know what was going to happen next.

Yar Judi only reflected for a moment. The discovery of this over-zealous officer of the Blood Guard could upset all his calculations and force him to cancel the orders he had only just given to his military men.

Yar Judi roared with laughter.

"So that's how it is, is it?" shouted the Dictator through his laughter. "You bring me news of the infinite grief of the Faetians

who could not bear to part with my incomparable Mada?"

"I meant something altogether different."

"Brainless insect! Answer my questions!"

"I am in fear and trembling."

"Why did my Supreme Officer Yar Alt die?"

"He was poisoned by a bullet."

"Who had such bullets, apart from him?"

"No one."

"Then is it not clear to you, insect, that, enamoured of the beautiful Mada, the Supreme Officer committed suicide in her room as a mark of his hopeless yearning for her?"

"But the nanny's body..."

"Was she not attached to her mistress? Did not the low creature understand that with the departure of her mistress to another planet, she would become an ordinary round-head, insignificant and despised, as is only right?"

"What? She took her own life?" Grom Alt was dumbfounded, remembering the wound in Lua's throat and shaking with fear at the thought that he had displeased the Dictator.

Yes, he certainly had displeased the Dictator. Yar Jupi was not at all disposed to ascertain why only two had been killed when at any moment hundreds of millions of Faetians could perish. The more so that this could hold up the space expedition that was meant to save Mada's life.

"However, this stripling from the Blood Guard will hardly keep his mouth shut," thought Yar Jupi.

The Dictator gently raised the terror-stricken officer off his knees.

"My good sentinel Grom Alt! You have every justification for replacing your suicide brother. Thank fate that true Faetians are the slaves of their feelings. If you should ever fall in love with a beautiful Faetess and she does not reciprocate your feelings, behave as did your elder brother. But allow me, as one who is proud of a daughter capable of inspiring such powerful emotions, to thank you for your faithful service and for bringing me news that has made my heart rejoice. I shall show you the treasure of my flower collection, which is unrivalled on Faena. These blooms are as beautiful as the Faetesses of our dreams. Savour their aroma."

Grom Alt obediently went to the niche where he could see the incredibly beautiful blossoms, dark-blue as the sky before evening and glittering with the gold spangles of new-lit stars.

"How do you like that perfume, my trusty sentinel?" asked Yar Judi, turning away.

"I have never breathed anything more enchanting. I feel an uncommon lightness all over my body. I feel like flying."

"Perhaps you will indeed fly one day, as the incomparable Mada is flying at this moment. If she discovers a life-supporting planet, then many longfaces will fly there to turn new continents into lands of the Superiors."

"Those words must be engraved on eternal stone. Each thought in here is like a disintegration explosion; it flashes and it casts down."

"The scent of the flowers is undoubtedly calling forth your eloquence. Order yourself the tunic of a Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard."

A blissful Grom Alt, who had never expected such a turn of events, flew out of the Dictator's office as if on wings.

If the secretary box had somehow been able to fathom the feelings of living Faetians, it would have noticed Grom Alt's unusual state of mind. But the box was only a machine and merely noted how much time the visitor had spent with the Dictator. Very little...

And it took very little time for Grom Alt to feel ill. He collapsed in the Blood Guard barracks and died in dreadful agony.

In the meantime, the automatic secretary began compiling a report on the state of the armed forces after the preparations announced by the Dictator for a disintegration war. But Yar Judi switched off the power supply to the pestilential box in a fury. He had been watching on the screen the last moments of the expedition's lift-off for Terr, mentally seeing off his daughter. With his whole being he suffered the parting with her and squeezed his temples between the palms of his hands until it hurt.

He had seen Mada, with a strange look on her face, run her eyes round the cosmodrome before she entered the lift-cage, her gaze resting on the ocean with its white bands of foam on the crests of the waves. She was followed by a Faetian, evidently one from the other continent.

For a moment, Yar Jupi was troubled at seeing a curly-haired half-breed so close to his daughter, but then he remembered that she would at least stay alive. He sighed heavily. He had a feeling that he had stepped on a steep and slippery surface. He could not keep his footing. And below him yawned an abyss.

Ave Mar and Mada were looking through the barred lift-cage. The ocean was expanding and the horizon seemed to be lifting up the clouds. Ave turned round and saw on the opposite side another ocean, a living one of massed Faetian heads with their faces upturned to the rocket. As if to symbolise Faena's overpopulation, they were jammed incredibly close together. A sudden spasm of yearning clutched at Ave's throat. Would he ever come back again? But he looked at Mada. They had chosen this course themselves, and let it not be only the course of their own happiness. Ave still had little understanding of the true forces driving Faena into war. He only wished with all his heart that the mysterious planet Terr would prove suitable for settlement by Faetians and that the danger of a disintegration war would be over and done with forever. Ave again remembered Kutsi Merc, who had brought him here, brought him and Mada together and had, in fact, given his life for their happiness. May his bones rest in peace...

Kutsi Merc's bullet-riddled hump had not been taken to its goal, but the delayed-action

fuse, decaying under the action of the air, was measuring out the last moments of peace on the planet Faena.

End of Part One

PART TWO

Explosion

Clubs, bills and partisans! Strike, beat them down!
Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!

W. Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*

Chapter One

THE LITTLE WORLD

There was uproar on Space Station Deimo. Station engineer Tycho Veg, handsome, prematurely greyhaired, slow and pensive, was looking in disapproval at the bustle that had just begun. But it was not in conformity with his mild nature to interfere in anything: he gave way in all things to his wife, Ala Veg, and she was the one who had thought of holding a banquet in honour of the arriving spaceship *Quest*.

The still unfaded beauty Ala Veg had become bored at home on Faena with teaching astronomy to blockheaded Superiors. She insisted on leaving with her husband for the space station, which only took married couples with the required special qualifications. They would be able to return to their three

children left on Faena after earning enough to last them for the rest of their lives, and Tycho Veg would finally become a workshop proprietor.

Ala Veg, with the pedigree face of a Superior, a fine, straight nose, a short upper lip and a sensual mouth, went about with a permanently haughty frown; she considered herself and her husband the two most important Faetians on the base.

However, the wife of the station chief, Nega Luton, who had illegally taken over the post of Sister of Health without being a qualified doctor, was of a different opinion. Encouraged by her husband, Mrak Luton, a corpulent donkey, she passed herself off as the first lady of space and never missed an opportunity to sting Ala Veg with a reference to the children she had abandoned. Ala would parry these blows, sparing neither Nega's barrenness nor her unattractive appearance.

Lada, the young but well-upholstered cook and gardener, a good-natured woman with an affectionate smile on her broad, snub-nosed face, did everything quickly and efficiently, trying to please everybody. She adored her husband, proud that he, Brat Lua, was the only one of the roundheads, thanks to his mother's position in the Dictator's family, who had been able to obtain an education on Danjab, the continent of the Culturals. He was sent to Deimo both as jack-of-all-trades and as a representative of the roundheads who were to move to the uncomfortable planet of Mar. Lada Lua willingly

followed him to serve all the inhabitants of Deimo.

A signal from her communications bracelet found Lada Lua in the greenhouse, a transparent cylindrical corridor thousands of paces long. Apart from Lada, no one used that corridor because it was on the axis of the space station and there was no artificial gravity created by centrifugal force as in the other quarters on the station. The nurserywoman did not feel her weight as she floated in and out among the air-roots of the plants. The function of soil was performed by a nutritive mist of the saps that the roots needed. The harvest in space was much bigger than on Faena.

The signal found Lada Lua collecting sweet fruits for the forthcoming banquet.

Holding on to the air-roots, Lada Lua hurried to answer Ala Veg's call. She had to float quite a distance through the tangled air-roots and then go down the shaft inside a spoke of the giant wheel, in whose rim all the station's quarters were housed.

The cage in the shaft seemed to fall down into an abyss. The feeling of weight began to appear only at the end of the ride, when the cage slowed down and stopped. The doors opened automatically. Lada Lua, her normal weight restored, walked out into the corridor, which seemed to tilt upwards before and behind her. She did not, however, have to climb any gradients.

Ala Veg was rushing about her cabin, exasperated at the clumsiness of her husband who was on his knees, unsuccessfully

trying to pin some kind of frill to her gown.

Lada Lua threw up her hands in delight.

Ala Veg unceremoniously dismissed her husband and he went off to prepare the welcome for the approaching ship, which would have to refuel. He realised that his wife was bored to death with the monotonous days and tedious dinners at the common table, the faces that she was sick of seeing, always the same ones, the same words heard so many times and the mutual friction that grew worse from day to day. Tycho Veg tried to understand his wife, to excuse her failings, to put them down to homesickness and to her pining for her children. He was missing them himself. If only one of them was here, they would be so happy! But the presence of children was not allowed on the space stations. The Superiors, when complementing the staff on Deimo, managed to oppress the roundheads there too. Nega Luton was barren, Ala Veg already had three children and at her age, which she kept secret, she had not decided to have a fourth. As a result, the ban only affected the young Lua couple, who could not have children on the planet, nor on the space station.

After helping Ala Veg to dress, Lada Lua ran to the kitchen with its glittering pans and dials to boil, roast and bake...

But the communications bracelet summoned her again, this time to Nega Luton. That important lady loved comforts and luxury more than anything. Her husband, a Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard, had

supplied her with all these in full measure on Faena. Least of all had the Lutons wanted to go into space. However, they had ended up there by order of the Dictator.

Lada Lua switched the automatic kitchen machines to a set program and hurried off to Nega Luton.

When the spaceship *Quest* went into orbit round Deimo and approached the station for docking, Mada and Ave never left the port-hole.

The enormous planet Mar with its convex rim filled over half the window. Sol no longer looked like a brilliant round star, but had become a *blinding disc with a magnificent corona*. For a short while, the planet blotted out its own star, plunging the ship into a swiftly-passing night.

Hand in hand, Mada and Ave greeted this unusual dawn of their new life, waiting for the brilliant, curly-fringed Sol to begin rising from behind the hump of Mar. The black surface of the *deserts turned brown, and gradually*, according to height, there followed one after another all the most delicate hues of a *gigantic rainbow* that did not hang over the rain-washed forests and plains, as on their native Faena, but embraced the desert planet in a crescent that merged with the rim of the gigantic sphere. Mada caught her breath. She could only squeeze Ave's fingers in silence.

Then the rainbow glittered at one point and the Faetians saw Deimo, their first destination. It was the brightest star in the heav-

ens, rising swiftly over the rim of the rainbow.

As it drew nearer, Deimo became a gigantic, irregularly shaped lump of rock, and soon a small star became visible next to it. This was Space Station Deimo, the Faetians' destination.

Then they were able to see that this star was a ring inclined at slight angle to the mass of Mar. Comparable to the planet Sat, it was a satellite of Mar's satellite. Finally, their eyes began to ache with staring at this artificial metal structure, which was reflecting the rays of Sol.

The first pilot of *Quest*, Smel Ven, the celebrated astronaut of the Superiors, was executing a complicated manoeuvre to approach the axis of the station's wheel and dock on to the central compartment. The silvery tail of the greenhouse extended from the station, a bright line receding into the darkness.

When *Quest* moved up to Deimo station, engineer Tycho Veg summoned Brat Lua to the central compartment as the mechanic who did the heavy work. Mrak Luton, the chief of the station, did not consider it necessary to go up to the central compartment in order to "float about on the loose" in null gravity. He preferred to stay in the ring corridor and paced round it, important and pompous, with his hands thrust behind his back.

The name Mrak (Gloom), given to him in his early youth, suited him: a pudgy, rectangular face, sparse grey hair and small, suspi-

cious eyes under the tufted eyebrows.

He did not linger by the lift-cage but continued promenading in the same direction all the time until finally, after he had gone round the whole outer ring, he turned up in the corridor on the other side.

However, all three Faetesses, unable to restrain their curiosity, met at the lift-cage.

The first to come out into the corridor was the exceptionally tall Um Sat.

The ladies respectfully inclined their heads.

Two Faetians came next.

The giant Gor Terr, up to the eyes in whiskers, was the ship's flight engineer and one of the men who designed it. He had a pronounced stoop, thanks to which his arms seemed uncommonly long. His friends used to joke that in height, strength and appearance he resembled the ancestors of the Faetians. However, his low, hairy brow hid an exceptional mind.

His new friend, Toni Fae, educated and refined, wrote poetry. He had a round face, a thin nose and wide-open eyes behind big spectacles.

Nega Luton took charge of the gigantic Gor Terr. Ala Veg took the youthful Toni Fae under her wing.

Um Sat went of his own accord to the roundhead Lada Lua.

"Will the gentle Faetess show me to where I can have a rest?"

Lada Lua blushed and, beside herself with happiness, led the great sage to his appointed cabin.

Ala Veg ran down the corridor with a provocative laugh, beckoning Toni Fae to catch up with her. She conducted him into a comfortable cabin and sat down in a light chair.

"And so is it not true, Toni Fae, that we have kindred souls. Is it by chance that we are both astronomers, that we find ourselves amid the stars and are sitting within reach of one another?"

Toni Fae took off his spectacles to see more clearly.

"The stars have made us friends, is it not so?" continued Ala Veg, well aware of the effect she was having on the young visitor.

"For the sake of everything I see here, it was well worth flying to the stars," he murmured, lowering his eyes.

"I already know that you're a poet. But you are also an astronomer. I want us to have views in common."

"I would like that so much!"

They were silent for a moment as they gazed at one another.

"Soon there will be a banquet. We shall sit side by side."

"Oh, yes!" Toni Fae nodded his head. "But we must also take Gor Terr under our wing. He is as helpless as I am."

"I love the helpless ones," laughed Ala Veg, affectionately touching Toni Fae's hand. "You are a charming boy and I'm so happy that you have arrived. If only you knew how fed up we are with one another here!"

Mrak Luton, who was finishing his stroll along the corridor as if no one had arrived at the station, had in fact been carefully measuring his pace. Of all the new arrivals, he regarded the Dictator's daughter as most important. For that reason, he went up to the lift-cage at the precise moment when Mada, Ave and Smel Ven, the first pilot, came out of it.

The chief of the station was chewing it over in his mind: after lift-off from Faena, the Dictator's daughter had married Ave Mar, son of the Ruler of the Culturals. What was this? Politics?

"May they be prolonged, the successful cycles in the life of the Wisest of the Wise who had the good fortune to have such a daughter," was the flowery welcome with which he greeted Mada, and he announced that she and Ave had been given two magnificent cabins in opposite compartments of the station.

Mada flared up.

"Was not Station Deimo in electromagnetic communication with *Quest*?" she asked angrily.

Mrak Luton shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

"If the customs of the Superiors are effective on the station," continued Mada, as if giving an order, "then you must give my husband and myself a double cabin and send the roundheaded Lua couple there at once."

The station chief bowed respectfully as low as his paunch would allow.

"They exist to serve. May the cycles in the lives of the Dictator and the Ruler be prolonged," he concluded, glancing at Ave for the first time.

Mrak Luton personally conducted the young couple to the best cabin on the station, and on the way he showed the glowering Smel Ven his quarters. Then he found Brat Lua and Tycho Veg who had just emerged from the central compartment. He ordered Brat Lua to find his wife and report with her to Mada and Ave. Only then did he notice that Smel Ven was still standing outside his cabin door. Mrak Luton went up to him and heard the following words, uttered in a half-whisper:

"The Dictator will hardly approve of such hasty hospitality." Smel Ven vanished, slamming the door behind him.

Mrak Luton stared dully at the plastic-covered door.

Brat Lua not only brought his wife to Ave and Mada, he also brought drawings. He was a calm Faetian of medium height, with a tight, glossy skin and intent eyes.

Since his mother had become Mada's nanny he had grown up away from her, but had always felt her influence. She had even managed to bring her son and her charge together and make them friends. However, their meetings had soon become impossible. The Dictator shut himself off from the world behind walls. The boy learned humiliation and injustice. Impressionable and proud, he became more and more withdrawn.

He had a rare determination. Mother Lua taught him that only knowledge would compel even those who were oppressing the roundheads to take him seriously. And so he fought stubbornly for every crumb of knowledge.

The result was that even in early youth, his face acquired an expression of firmness and concentration.

He fell in love with Lada Nep before his departure for Danjab, the continent of the Culturals, to finish his education there. Finally persuaded by the nanny and Mada herself, Yar Jupi agreed, although he kept his real opinion to himself.

For several cycles, Lada devotedly waited for her betrothed, intending after his return to leave immediately on the Dictator's orders for Space Station Deimo, created by him to consolidate his authority and ostensibly to fulfil his plan of resettling the roundheads on Mar.

Brat Lua was now hurrying to share with Mada and Ave the fruits of his reflections and of sleepless nights spent at his drawings.

"I've been planning how to make life better for the roundheads," he said hurriedly but firmly. "I've planned the construction of deep underground cities with an artificial atmosphere. On the surface of Mar, in the midst of the deserts which you see in the porthole, I have been planning oases of fertility. It will be enough to water them with melted water from the polar ice and deliver it to them along underground rivers. These will

have to be excavated." He looked trustingly at his listeners. "I have been waiting so long for real men of learning!"

Mada went up to Brat Lua.

"We have known one another since childhood, and we both loved Mother Lua."

"'Loved' her?" The Faetian went suddenly on his guard, staring hard at Mada.

Inwardly alarmed, Lada Lua went over to her husband.

"I ... I must tell you everything..." continued Mada.

"What is it? Is the war beginning?"

"Mother Lua tried to stop it," said Mada in a flash of intuition. "And she was killed, Brat..."

"Killed?" The Faetian went white in the face.

"She was murdered by that scoundrel Yar Alt. But your mother, and mine, has been avenged."

Brat Lua let his head fall onto the table with the drawings spread on it and began sobbing. Mada held Ave by the hand, herself almost in tears. Lada Lua rushed to the door.

"Mrak Luton is coming to invite us to a banquet," she whispered.

"He must not know anything," warned Mada.

The little world of the tiny inhabited islet in the Universe was like the big world of the planet, rent by hostile forces.

Chapter Two

THE GOLDEN APPLE

Mada's strongest sensation was one of light. It was falling in a brilliant mosaic onto the ground through the leaves of the trees, whose trunks resembled compactly grown roots. Above, they spread out like transparent canopies filled with light. Each fruit up there was like a tiny star.

A stream of foam, tumbling down from a stone ledge, was lit up by a quivering rainbow. The smooth lake that fed the current lay tranquilly there, crossed by a sparkling mother-of-pearl footpath.

Round the banks grew fantastic trees bearing golden apples. And the water lured Mada from the depths with the same vivid fruits, very slightly tinged with haze, that you could touch so easily by just reaching out your hand.

She thought how ugly the two unwieldy, clumsy creatures seemed in such a setting. They moved about on their hind legs, holding their bodies erect but rolling from side to side at each step. Their sturdy bodies, with belts high on the hips, were decorated with a spiral ornament. Their upper and lower extremities were covered with inflated bubbles and their heads were enclosed in hard spheres with slits for the eyes.

Two enormous birds were swimming across the lake with proudly upcurved necks; they turned their heads with their red beaks

and made trustingly for the shore.

Several light quadrupeds came out of the forest. They had the same wondrous trees with root-branches growing on their heads, but without fruits or foliage. The creatures began drinking the water.

A mighty beast with greenish, glittering eyes softly sprang onto the bright patches in the shade of the canopied trees. His hide merged with the bright mosaic. Lithe and powerful, he made his way soundlessly towards the water, paying no attention to the horned denizens of the forest nor to the strange newcomers.

"I'm not even frightened," said Mada through her helmet intercom.

"A virgin, unfrightened world," responded Ave.

"And there's so much light!"

"The experts on Faena thought it could kill."

"It can kill only darkness, ignorance and hatred. We have found a world where evil and hatred do not and cannot exist."

Mada went up quite close to the watering place. A young reindeer looked round curiously, leapt out of the water and dug its wet muzzle into Mada's glove.

"Could you think of such a thing on Faena?" she cried.

"Alas, there's no room left for them there!"

"These are children of light. Open your visor and look. Don't be afraid, the eye is a most self-accommodating organ. They won't believe our stories on Faena."

"Millions of Faetians are waiting for them."

"Aren't we cheating this way? Why this envelope shutting us off from the new world. I've opened my visor all the way!"

"Mada, my dear!" warned Ave. "That's dangerous."

"We've found a world of amazing beauty, but we haven't proved that we can live on it."

"We must remember Um Sat's warning."

"What is there to be afraid of? Dangerous invisible beings? But light is the best medicine for them. I myself am a Sister of Health. Our ancestors didn't take thought, they injected themselves with illness-creating microbes in order to rid all Faetians of deadly diseases. It is the doctor on Terr who should be the first to shed a space-suit! It is a duty! Besides, I want to bathe in the lake. Will my Ave, who tamed the ocean waves on a board, back out now? Take the tablets I gave you. They will protect you from the unknown world of the Planet of Light. And its light will help us. Take off your space-suit! And help me."

"Why are you tempting me, Mada?"

"So that we can be the first to do what must be done anyway. After all, we can't go back to Faena without having tried to live here in real freedom. And not in a shell."

So saying, Mada plucked a golden apple and held it out to Ave.

"Peel it for me, please. It has a skin as bright as Sol and as tough as one of our space-suits."

When *Quest* began approaching the orbit of Terr, the members of the expedition found the brilliant light of Sol more and more intolerable. It became particularly searing when the ship went into orbit round the planet.

Mada established that Terr's atmosphere was strikingly like that of Faena. Except that there was little carbon dioxide and there was no greenhouse effect. The planet freely emitted the excess solar heat into space. The conditions of existence on it were consequently similar to those on Faena, as Ave Mar had once suggested.

Toni Fae, the astronomer, observed the planet with the enthusiasm of a poet. Most of it was under water and seemed to be hatched with the lines of the waves. The land and sea surfaces were strikingly varied in colour. But most of all, there were clouds over Terr. Singly, they cast distinct shadows onto the surface of the planet, and in the misty oceans here and there it was possible to distinguish the spiral whirlwinds of hurricanes raging down below.

But nowhere, neither on land nor on the sea coast, could they see the patches of towns stretching out the tendrils of roads. This was what struck everyone at the first sight of Terr from space.

"Must be a dead planet," suggested Flight Engineer Gor Terr.

"It's a live one!" exclaimed Toni Fae. "The green of the continents means vegetation. And the others..."

"That's the whole point; you won't guess what they mean."

"Why not?" said Toni Fae animatedly. "It's easy!"

"R-really?" said Gor Terr, astonished.

"The priests in ancient times believed that every living being was surrounded by an aura. Its colour was supposed to enable the 'psychic vision' to recognise the most secret thoughts and feelings."

"You mean the pr-riests would have looked on Terr as a living cr-reature?"

"Yes, so as to draw a map of it," laughed Toni Fae.

"All r-right, let's get on with it. I can see black gaps in the mountain r-range."

"That means the Mountains of Bitterness and Hate."

"Much as on our Faena. There are dirty green valleys r-running into the distance."

"The Valleys of Jealousy."

"And the black and gr-reen ones?"

"Base Deceit."

"Is it worth it, starting with such gr-rim names?"

"Then look at the big land areas."

"Bright gr-reen."

"The priests considered that colour to be a sign of worldly wisdom and subtle deceit."

"Let's be indulgent to Terr and call the dry land the Continent of Wisdom without any deceit. And here is a narrow sea with r-red lightning flashing over it."

"The Sea of Wrath."

"It has a pink bay."

"The Bay of Love."

"And the sea coast here is r-russet brown."

"The Coast of Greed."

"Not bad for future Terrans. Will it be better with the dark blue ocean, perhaps?"

"The Ocean of Hope."

"And its light blue bay?"

"The Bay of Justice."

"That's better already. And these fire-breathing mountains with the r-red flames and the black smoke?"

"The Volcanoes of Passions."

As they carried on with their game, the young Faetians gradually drew the first map of Terr with amusing names recalling the members of the expedition.

"As for Mada's aura," continued Toni Fae, "that's a spectrum of dawn in space."

"And what about Toni Fae himself? Hasn't he been blazing with a bright r-red aura ever since the visit to Deimo?"

Toni looked embarrassed.

"You see," continued Gor Terr, "I interpret your aura no worse than one of those ancient pr-riests." And he laughed knowingly.

"It's not so difficult," said Toni Fae in an attempt at self-defence. "You can see into Ave and even into Smel Ven."

"R-really?.. Even into Smel Ven?"

"We're all blazing red," sighed Toni Fae, "only the shades are all different."

"Then shouldn't we name the seas after lovers?" said Gor Terr, clutching at this playful idea.

"It would be better to call Terr the Planet

of Eternal Passions."

Toni Fae had been right not only about Terr, but about Smel Ven. If he had an aura, then it must inevitably be fiery red. He was burning with love for Mada, and the feelings she inspired would have streaked his own aura with black and dirty-green.

Fate's darling on Faena, a celebrated astronaut, the favourite of the Faetesses, he had not even dared to make Mada's acquaintance although he had often admired her on the Great Shore. He had hoped that the prompt departure into space would cure him, but... Mada was close at hand to humiliate and destroy him with her marriage to an insignificant half-breed whose father had gained the Ruler's chair by nefarious means.

Like many longfaces, Smel Ven never did things by halves. Which is why he had become a celebrated and fearless astronaut and had flown to Terr. He had not been unpleasant or cunning as a young man, but Mada's contempt had stirred up the hidden sides of his character. Seeing how happy Mada and Ave were together and hating them for that reason, he brooded on plans of revenge as cunning as they were cruel... But he had to remain beyond all suspicion. The planet Terr itself was going to help him!

Quest, its braking engines switched on, was decelerating, without friction in the atmosphere and without any overheating of the cabin's outer surface. Gor Terr, the ship's designer, carried out the landing as "lift-off in reverse", in his own words. He did not

apply the parachute brakes typical of the early stages in Faetian astronavigation. The spaceship could make landfall as slowly as it had lifted off.

Quest came down on its three landing feet, towering above the tallest trees and listing dangerously. The automatic controls immediately straightened it up.

The astronauts pressed their faces up against the portholes. A dense forest of unrecognisable trees rose on either side of a river.

"This is Terr," announced Um Sat, "that is to be the birthplace of our successors! In the meantime, however, we must refrain from taking off our space-suits. We have yet to explore the unknown world of this planet."

First, they lowered the instruments through the open hatch, then dropped the ladder, and strange figures wearing stiff space-suits began climbing down to the ground.

The last to emerge were Smel Ven and Mada. Smel Ven helped Mada to put on her helmet.

"Could it be that a Faetess like Mada Judi..."

"Mada Mar," she corrected him.

"Could it be that a Faetess like Mada could agree with Um Sat and disgrace herself with this garb?"

"You are suggesting a brave deed that is worthy of you, Smel Ven."

"There is nothing in the world that could frighten me. But I am the ship's pilot, and an element of return is vital to Um Sat."

Mada frowned at his pompousness.

"You consider yourself the most valuable?"

Smel Ven restrained himself; it was not in his interests to annoy Mada.

"You are a Sister of Health yourself and will feel a need to discard that clothing as soon as you go into the new world."

Mada pulled down her visor.

The sunset on Terr was spreading over the river.

In space, the astronauts had become familiar with Sol and his furious, raging brilliance. But here, in the evening of their first day on Terr, it was possible to stare with the naked eye at the reddish, flattened Sol, shorn of his space corona. Elongated clouds were beginning to gather near its oval disc. Two of them, coming from different directions, joined up and divided Sol into two. And then a miracle happened. Instead of one, two heavenly bodies hung over the horizon one after the other, each of them purple in colour.

Mada could not take her eyes off this spectacle as she watched the two bodies change in size: the lower one touched the sea of forest, the upper one became thinner and thinner, dwindling to a mere segment of a disc and finally disappearing altogether. The lower part of Sol also vanished behind a big cloud. Now the whole sky flickered with fire. And, as if in a crimson ocean spreading above the clouds, there hung lilac waves, and very high up, illumined by the sinking Sol, there floated a solitary white island, its red-hot edges blazing.

The sunset glow was gradually dying away, but the little cloud burned on without going out. Then, as if all of a sudden, darkness came down on Terr. Night had fallen, just as on Faena. And even the stars were the same.

Except that Terr did not have at that time a magnificent nocturnal luminary like Faena's satellite, Lua, which gave such beauty to the Faetian night and which had appeared near Terr a million years later. The planet Ven, however, was particularly brilliant here. Toni Fae pointed out to Mada the evening star that had begun shining on the horizon like a spark in the flames of dawn. It was still the brightest object in the night sky.

The astronauts continued admiring the sky of Terr for quite some time. Strange nocturnal sounds came from the forest.

Um Sat suggested spending the night in the rocket.

Mada went back inside reluctantly, although she could take off her heavy space-suit in there.

She could not shake off the unpleasant impression made by Smel Ven's remarks.

Next morning, the Faetians went for a stroll through the forest in pairs. They were to assemble by the rocket at a prearranged time.

Long shadows lay on the ground. According to the instruments, it had turned cooler. They were about to see Sol set on Terr for the second time.

Ave and Mada were late. Um Sat was alarmed. Toni Fae painstakingly kept calling the missing pair. Mada and Ave did not reply, as if electromagnetic communications had broken down.

Gor Terr sent up two signal rockets in succession. They soared up into the colourful evening sky, leaving curly trains of smoke behind them. The red and yellow curves floated across the heavens for a long time.

"From red to yellow," quipped Toni Fae. "From love to wisdom. A hopeless call."

Gor Terr shook the inflated sleeve of his space-suit at him.

Smel Ven kept apart as if nothing had happened. His helmet concealed tightened lips and downcast eyes.

His hopes were finally fulfilled. Mada ran out of the forest in her skin-tight, wet undergarment. She had taken off her space-suit!

Smel Ven trembled and raised his visor.

This was the Mada whom the sculptors had tried to catch sight of on the Great Shore and whom Smel Ven himself had admired. Head flung back on the slender neck, dark blue, ecstatic eyes. She was holding a golden apple in each hand.

"Ave and I are now the first inhabitants of Terr. It'll go down in the planet's history!"

Ave followed behind her, also without his space-suit. They had evidently been enjoying a swim. He was also carrying two golden fruits.

"Maybe we are at fault," he said in response to the reproach in Um Sat's eyes,

"but it's now been proved that Faetians can live on Terr. The planet will feed them. The labours of the colonists will be generously rewarded. This means an end to overpopulation on Faena!"

Um Sat merely gave Ave a look; the other bowed his head in embarrassment.

"We simply carried out an experiment. Someone had to, otherwise there would have been no point in flying here."

Smel Ven waited for many days, but in vain. Ave and Mada, Terr's first inhabitants, enjoyed all the benefits of the paradise they had found and did not succumb to any form of illness.

After a sufficient period of time had elapsed, Um Sat permitted the other Faetians to take off their space-suits.

They took this alien world of nature at once: the air, filled with strange perfumes, the bright light, unknown on Faena, and the unfamiliar sounds coming from the forest. Something would be walking about in there, hiding, leaping from branch to branch, shrieking, bellowing. Then, suddenly, all the noises would die down and from the depths of the forest Silence itself would seem to be watching the uninvited guests.

Chapter Three

PARADISE FOUND

Um Sat was regarding his companions with a kind of strange sadness, trying not to go

near them. He made a sign to Smel Ven and climbed up into the rocket. The First Pilot of *Quest* found the scientist already lying on the couch in the common cabin. His cheeks were hollow and the pouches under his eyes were even more pronounced.

Smel Ven stopped a short distance away. His narrow face with the big bald patches on his head looked even longer because of the straggly little goatee beard.

"I feel a great weakness," said the Elder. "I have no headache or rash. It might pass off. Let the Sister of Health stay with me; the rest can carry on with their work. However, I still consider it my duty to hand over the leadership of the expedition to you, as the ship's commander."

"So be it," declared Smel Ven solemnly, drawing himself up as if on parade. "I assume all the authority! Henceforth, I shall be in charge of everything. And I order you, my aged friend, to lie down. You know where the provisions are. I forbid all subordinates to come near the rocket."

"Even the Sister of Health?" asked Um Sat quietly.

"Even her," snapped Smel Ven. "She will be useful to the others if they fall ill as well."

Um Sat laughed weakly but said nothing.

"I am leaving now," Smel Ven hastened to say.

"I am replacing you," said the old man after him, but the hatch had already slammed shut.

Um Sat wearily closed his eyes. When

would he stop making mistakes? Why ever did they think him wise?

Smel Ven assembled all the astronauts.

"Um Sat has ordered me to inform you that the camp is being transferred from the rocket into the forest. As it will be hard for the old man to spend the night there, he has delegated the leadership of the camp to me as his deputy."

"But the forest's dangerous at night," commented Toni Fae.

Smel Ven looked at him contemptuously.

"I don't know who is more graced with cowardice: the astronomer or the poet."

Toni Fae flushed. Gor Terr interceded on his behalf.

"Caution is useful, even in a leader."

"What risk can there be," said Smel Ven aggressively, "if we've come to a world of love and harmony?" And he turned to Mada and Ave.

"Who's threatening us?" said Mada, backing him up.

Ave nodded silently.

The explorers collected up everything they needed, armed themselves at Gor Terr's insistence with pistols, though loaded only with stun bullets harmless to animal life, and set off into the forest.

Mada urgently wanted to see Um Sat, but Smel Ven refused to let her; he was anxious to get into the forest before darkness fell.

They pitched camp on the shore of the lake from which the stream fell into the chasm. White birds with curved necks were swimming on rippling water that was tinged with mother-of-pearl.

"Why do they have such long necks?" asked Toni Fae.

"To fetch up underwater weeds," replied Mada.

"A very peaceful occupation," commented Gor Terr.

The evening glow was already flickering in the sky when Smel Ven sent Mada and Ave to survey the other shore of the lake. They had to make their way across the stream, jumping from rock to rock.

They walked on, occasionally stooping under low branches, dressed in their clinging black suits and delightedly looking about them. Suddenly, they both stopped in their tracks.

A reindeer, its antlered head flung back, raced past in front of them. A powerful beast with a spotted hide was following it in great soft bounds. It overtook the reindeer and pounced on its neck. The victim, its artery bitten through, made a last desperate bound and collapsed under a tree. There was a bellowing sound. The beast was tearing its prey to pieces.

Ave snatched at his pistol to reload it with poisoned bullets.

"We daren't take lives here," intervened Mada. "We mustn't bring Faena's morals with us."

"I'm afraid they already exist here."

"But why?"

"The laws of life's development on the planets are exactly the same."

"But what about the watering place?" protested Mada weakly. "None of them attacked any of the others there."

"A beast of prey can't just slaughter animals. It lets them live, drink, propagate and grow. Otherwise it won't have anything to eat. It's like a forest animal-breeder: by catching the weakest when out hunting, it improves the selection of the herd."

Mada made no objection. She walked along at Ave's side, dejected, conscious of his hand on her shoulder. But suddenly he snatched it away and slapped his forehead. Mada involuntarily did the same. Then she stared in bewilderment at her fingers, which were stained with blood. It had become dark in the forest and there was a buzzing noise everywhere. Tiny flying creatures swooped on the Faetians and began stinging them. Ave and Mada had to pluck branches and beat the flies off.

They found Smel Ven alone in the camp. He was frantically slapping his cheeks and neck.

"Filthy creatures!" he swore. "We'd be better off in our space-suits."

"I was terribly wrong," began Mada at once. "Ave and I have just seen murder in the forest. Murder is committed here as on Faenal! We must move the camp back to the rocket as soon as possible, to open ground where there aren't any insects or beasts of prey."

"We're not going back to the rocket," snapped Smel Ven. "There's a far more terrible death in store for us there—the one that was lying in wait for Um Sat."

"What d'you mean?" Mada was outraged. "And you, Um Sat's deputy, wouldn't allow me, as a doctor, to be with him?"

"Such was his will. It's not just filthy flying creatures or spotted predators, but the hidden microworld that's bared its teeth at us."

"I'm going to Um Sat!" declared Mada.

"With me," added Ave.

"Only cowards who've found a pretext escape by running away!" shouted Smel Ven after them, forgetting his own false warning.

Mada ran ahead. Ave could hardly see her outline in the swiftly approaching darkness. Suddenly, his heart contracted with pain. It seemed to him that Mada had been stopped by a gigantic round-shouldered creature with long, dangling arms. He drew his pistol, which he still hadn't loaded with live ammunition, but noticed that Mada was not in the least afraid. Ave gasped with relief. That showed how badly his nerves had been set on edge by the forest episode! He hadn't recognised Gor Terr. And now the puny Toni Fae also turned up.

Ave put his pistol away and only then did he see at least five figures like Gor Terr with him. The Faetoids knocked Toni Fae and the frantically resisting Mada off their feet. The whole gang of them charged at Gor Terr.

Ave dashed towards Gor Terr, but couldn't tell him from among the similar round-shouldered, shaggy beasts. They sorted themselves out and all five of them hurled themselves on Ave.

He hadn't time to draw his pistol. He merely shook off the assailants clinging to him. They were bigger than Ave, but had no idea how to fight. Using his fists and his feet, Ave scattered the beasts as they fell on him. Two of them writhed under a tree, the others flung themselves at Ave again. Throwing over his shoulder one who stank of sweat and mud, he glimpsed Gor Terr dealing with his opponents. Several shaggy carcasses were squirming at his feet. But still more of the enemy were tumbling down onto his shoulders from the trees. Ave tried to shout that he should run to open ground, but a shaggy paw clamped itself over his face. Ave twisted the paw till the bones cracked.

Mada was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Toni Fae. Only Gor Terr and Ave Mar continued the unequal struggle.

"Hold out, Ave!" shouted Gor Terr. "These are all of one local family!"

Ave flung aside the first assailants, but at least a dozen fresh ones leapt on him. Four taloned paws fastened on to each of his hands and feet.

The young Faetian summoned up all his strength, heaved and crashed to the ground, crushing his enemies underneath him. More shaggy beasts leapt onto the pile of weltering bodies. He felt as if he had been buried

in a mine shaft: he could neither move nor breathe.

On seeing Ave's predicament, Gor Terr rushed to help him. But it would have probably been easier to fell with one shoulder the wide-spreading tree under which the scrum had taken place than to come to Ave's assistance. Then Gor Terr made a sudden leap and grabbed hold of a low branch. Two or three of the Faetoids, no shorter in stature than he was himself, hung onto his legs. The bough bent, threatening to crack. With an incredible burst of strength, Gor Terr hoisted himself up onto the bough with all the animals clinging to him. They dived head-downwards off it, howling frantically. Two more seemed to be waiting above Gor Terr, but were thrown down.

With an agility denied to his shaggy opponents, Gor Terr literally soared up to the top-most branches of the tree.

Despairing shrieks and roars came from below.

Gor Terr jumped down from the top-most branch and, it seemed, ought to have crashed into the paws of the beasts galloping in a frenzy round it, but by some miracle he seized hold of a branch on a neighbouring tree and ran lightly along it, although it bent under his considerable weight.

A way had been found, the only escape from the bellowing herd below.

Gor Terr couldn't understand why none of the fanged beasts had bitten him. There was no time to think about it, and he con-

tinued running along the upper branches. He might well have been envied by his remote ancestors, who had come down from the trees of Faena once upon a time.

His pursuers, however, were running along below every bit as fast as he was himself.

At this point, Gor Terr saw something like a Faetian liana. It hung down from a distant, very high tree and was caught on one of the branches near him. Gor Terr seized hold of the living cable and flew downwards. He had a glimpse of the infuriated herd. Gathering speed like a swinging pendulum, he sailed over his pursuers' heads and managed to kick the biggest of them. He was followed by a despairing wail.

Gor Terr caught sight of a waterfall below him. The liana carried him across to the other bank. He clutched at a branch, jumped down to the ground and started running.

The shouts of pursuit died down far behind him. The Faetoids were evidently afraid of water and could not cross to the other side of the river after him.

Gor Terr slowed down and breathed heavily, inflating his chest, and only then did he discover that in his confusion he had forgotten to bring his pistol from the camp, although he had been the one to insist that everybody should be armed.

He was overcome with horror. There was no one left now, except himself. He must hurry back to the rocket, but his news of what had happened to all the Faetians would be the death of Um Sat.

He had no alternative, however. He decided to wait until dawn, believing that the Faetoids were nocturnal and feared the daylight.

He climbed a tree and settled himself on the topmost branch.

As he pictured his friends torn to pieces, he wept with grief and helplessness. The tears stuck in his beard, which was as matted as the hair of a Faetoid. At times, his reason was clouded with frenzy. Suddenly, in the pale glimmer of dawn, he saw one of the abominable creatures slowly coming along under the tree.

Round-shouldered, almost the same height, it was rolling from side to side at every step. Its back was covered with wool. The beast turned round, and Gor Terr realised that it was a female Faetoid. She was walking erect, and her forepaws dangled down to her knees. From time to time, she stooped to pluck a plant or grub up a root.

Gor Terr shook with fury, making ready to pounce on the beast and deal with her.

At that moment, something flashed past below and the Faetoid fell to the ground. She was being suffocated by the spotted animal that Mada had told him about.

Himself not knowing why, Gor Terr jumped down on the predator. The animal roared, trying to struggle free of the weight that had landed on its back. But Gor Terr jumped off and gripped it by the hind legs. The human giant pulled the beast towards him, raised it into the air on his outstretched hands and dashed its head against a tree-trunk, then

flung the inert body to one side.

The Faetoid rose to her feet and stared at Gor Terr with curiosity rather than in fear. He even took offence.

"Am I really so like her fellow-creatures that I didn't even frighten her?"

She approached him trustingly and said, "Dzin!"

Yes, that was what she said! These animals could pronounce articulate words. If they were not wholly rational, then in a million or more cycles they could become like the rational Faetians.

"Gor," said the Faetian, pointing at his naked, hairy chest. His shirt had been ripped down to the waist.

"Dzin," repeated the Faetoid, and she pointed at herself. It would be hard to say what thought process was taking place in the low-browed, sloping skull. However, she too was capable of the gratitude innate in many Faetian animals.

Dzin had obviously been overtaken by some kind of thought. She clutched Gor Terr by the hand and pulled him along, gibbering incoherently.

Was she taking him to her lair, acknowledging him not only as her saviour, but as her master?

Gor Terr frowned. He wanted to shoo her away and even raised his hand. But she waited for the blow so meekly that he thought better of hitting her. It occurred to him that she might lead him to the dwelling of her fellow-creatures. What if his friends were

still alive? Could he miss a chance of going to their assistance? He pushed her forward and went after her.

Dzin was overjoyed and ran off, looking round at Gor Terr. Both moved fast and soon crossed the same stream. She knew where a tree lay across it. Dzin was afraid of water.

Then they walked through the Faetian camp on the shore of the lake. Gor Terr could see the traces of a violent struggle. Bags and scientific instruments lay scattered all round, but the victims of the struggle were nowhere to be seen. Smel Ven had evidently not been able to use his weapon and had been seized by the beasts.

Dzin looked at Gor Terr, but he prodded her firmly in the back. That was evidently the kind of treatment she understood best. She looked round, bared her fangs in the semblance of a grin and joyfully ran on ahead.

Soon she stopped and made a warning sign, if the movement of her paw meant anything at all.

Gor Terr looked cautiously out from behind a tree growing on the edge of a gully. On the opposite side he could see caves, and down below swarmed a herd of shaggy beasts. He could hear them growling, bellowing and shrieking.

Gor Terr saw Smel Ven among the Faetoid predators. He was standing proudly in their midst, with many of them clutching him. For some reason, they had not yet killed him.

At this point, Gor Terr realised that these creatures could not tie people up, they could only hold the prisoner with their forepaws while standing on their hind legs. But what if they didn't slaughter their victim before devouring him? What if they didn't like dead flesh?

The Faetoids began roaring down below. Smel Ven was hurled to the ground and the shaggy bodies piled on top of him, tearing him to pieces.

It was too much for Gor Terr. He felt sick.

But Smel Ven never uttered a groan or a cry. Gor Terr had never thought it possible to have such superhuman fortitude. He felt ashamed of his own weakness. He was almost about to jump down, but saw Mada, Ave and Toni Fae on the opposite cliff. They had evidently not been slaughtered so that they could be eaten alive. All of them, like Smel Ven, were unbound. But four beasts were holding each by the hands and feet. The Faetians couldn't move an inch.

Gor Terr turned to Dzin. She sprang back and lay on the ground, pretending to have fallen asleep. Then she jumped up, waved her paw towards the beasts who were devouring their victim and again threw herself down on the ground.

The engineer understood. Dzin was trying to explain that they would go to sleep as soon as they had gorged themselves.

Dzin was right. She knew her fellow-creatures well.

They soon lay down in a heap and began snoring.

Only the sentries stayed in their places, pretending to be awake, but actually nodding their shaggy heads.

Gor Terr was not very hopeful of success. Still, he crawled to one side and silently moved across the gully. When he had crawled up to the cave in which the prisoners were lying, he jumped to his feet at the entrance.

Ave Mar was lying nearest to him with a useless pistol at his side.

Before the flesh-glutted sentries could make a move, Gor Terr proceeded to dispatch them by methods ordered by Yar Judi in schools for the Superiors. He struck with precision in the morning light. The sensitive spots of the Faetoids were almost the same as those of the Faetians. The shaggy beasts rolled over without a sound. Gor Terr snatched up Ave Mar's pistol and fired point-blank at the fourth Faetoid who was still gripping Ave by the hand. It was a stun bullet; the creature fell in convulsions and lay still.

The crash of the explosion terrified the other guards. They let Mada and Toni Fae go free. Mada seized her chance and hit one of them so deftly that he rolled down over the rocks.

Toni Fae had barely recovered his breath when Ave and Gor Terr hurled themselves on the dumbfounded guards.

Gor Terr fired a few more shots. Ave was throwing the feebly resisting beasts down to the bottom of the gully. Indescribable panic broke out down there.

The beasts had no idea of how to put up a fight. They had seized their victims with the sole purpose of eating them. After devouring the first, they had slept peacefully without even mounting a guard. And now—deafening claps of thunder, of which they had always gone in terror. Moreover, the corpses of their fellow-creatures were raining down on them as if from the sky.

The herd scattered, shrieking and abandoning the dead and maimed on the bottom of the gully.

Mada threw herself on Ave Mar's breast and sobbed her heart out.

Toni Fae offered his hand to his friend and saviour.

In the corner of his eye, Ave noticed one more Faetoid at the cave entrance who was evidently intending to attack Gor Terr from behind.

He promptly sprang to the rescue, but Gor Terr's huge arm held him back.

"This is Dzin, a female. She helped me to r-rescue you."

Mada stared in amazement at the shaggy creature, who was not hiding her delight at Gor Terr's strength and fearlessness.

Chapter Four

AT THE PEAK OF CIVILISATION

When *Quest* lifted off for space, the body of Kutsi Merc was lying in an underground

corridor. But the pool of blood under him did not dry up, as if the stiletto-pierced heart was still bleeding. Suddenly, Kutsi Merc's hand twitched, fell on the wound and stanchd it. The blood coagulated and stopped flowing.

It was a long time before Kutsi Merc moved again. Not one of many millions of Faetians could have survived his condition; not a single one except Kutsi Merc himself.

Kutsi Merc came from a roundhead family who had fled the continent of the Superiors after the Uprising of Justice was defeated. Yar Judi was only beginning the Blood Bath there. Kutsi was still a small boy without a name of his own. Kutsi's father, Khrom Merc, suspected of being sympathetic to the Doctrine of Justice, was earmarked for elimination by the Blood Guard. The Mercs were poor and could not afford to escape by ship. The three of them made an incredible journey on a raft knocked together by Khrom Merc. After harrowing days at sea, enduring storms that swept away their meagre provisions and a lull that brought an intolerable thirst, they avoided pursuit (none of the Blood Guard ever thought of looking for a raft in the ocean!) until finally, emaciated and at the end of their tether, they reached the coast of Danjab. But no one there had prepared a warm welcome for the refugees. They could not even find work in the fields and workshops of the proprietors, who were indifferent to anything that did not promise gain.

Reduced to desperation by poverty, Khrom Merc steeled himself for what he would have formerly rejected with disgust: he decided to make money out of his deformed little son.

Kutsi had two hearts. This "deformity" is exceedingly rare. On the continent of the Superiors, the parents had kept quiet about their son's abnormality, afraid that he might be pronounced unfit and destroyed.

But here, on the continent of the Culturals, anything that could arouse even morbid curiosity could be a source of profit.

They began exhibiting the little boy at show-booths. Crowds of the curious came rolling in. And each spectator felt himself entitled to feel the naked, terrified "monster". He was roughly turned round, cold tubes were applied to his chest and back, or ears were pressed to his skin in a repulsive manner. He was made to squat, dance to general guffaws and shouts, then again he was examined and auscultated. The rubbernecks shook their heads in bewilderment, marvelled and went away to tell, exaggerating wildly, about the weird monster they had seen with their own eyes.

The enterprising Khrom Merc managed to earn so much that he became the owner, first of a small workshop, then of big ones in which thousands of Faetians were employed by him.

Kutsi Merc grew up, remembering with shame and revulsion the days when his deformity had been "put on show". How-

ever, not only his father profited by it. Soon, it transpired that the little boy was becoming uncommonly strong and tough. By tacit agreement between the son and his parents, his two hearts now became a family secret so as not to attract a wearisome curiosity about the boy in school. When he was given a new name on his coming-of-age (he was called Khrom-Merc Junior), he was named Kutsi (Shorty) because of his ungainly shape as a result of his having a double heart.

Kutsi soon grasped that he could make a virtue of his deformity. During the humiliating career of the "show-booth freak", Kutsi Merc developed the traits of character that were to decide his profession.

Unsociable, cunning, venomous, hating the Superiors across the ocean, he possessed rare strength and stamina. He caught the attention of the Special Service. He was found suitable for intelligence work. His irreproachable knowledge of barbarian mores and the barbarian language enabled him to carry out many dangerous transoceanic assignments (but not on a raft any more).

Making his way up the secret ladder, intelligent and self-effacing, rational and decisive, the son of a proprietor and in no way sympathetic to the Doctrine of Justice, he came to enjoy a position of trust among the big proprietors who were selecting convenient rulers for themselves.

Dobr Mar's predecessor had been so afraid of a disintegration war that he had been ready to give way to Dictator Yar Jupi, and

so he had become useless to the proprietors. Kutsi Merc was able at that time to warn "the Ruler's friend", Dobr Mar, on what terms he could himself become Ruler, by being the first to start a disintegration war. That was the only way the proprietors, who were members of the Great Circle, thought of dealing with the proprietors of the Blood Council.

On becoming Ruler, Dobr Mar manoeuvred skillfully on the brink of war. When his re-election fell due and he had to take the prescribed step, he sent Kutsi on a diversionary escapade, even risking his own son's life in his personal interests. Kutsi Merc was such an eminent spy that he could have refused the mission. But ever since childhood he had had his own score to settle with the Superiors. He could forgive them neither the Blood Bath, nor the misfortunes of his own family, nor the oppression of the roundheads. That is why Kutsi Merc became a "hunchback", carrying on his back a disintegration charge to destroy the Dictator's Lair together with all the technology delivered by the short-sighted proprietors of Danjab.

Kutsi Merc had taken a dangerous risk and had lost, struck down by Yar Alt's stiletto.

But it could never have entered Yar Alt's mind, when he tugged the stiletto out of Kutsi's heart, that the hunchback had a second heart.

Kutsi took a long, long time to regain consciousness. The second heart continued

beating. Only an organism as unusual as his could win. But he was too weak owing to the enormous loss of blood.

When he came round and realised what had happened, he first of all took off his "hump" and examined it. It had been punctured in several places. The delayed-action fuse had been rendered useless. He threw the "hump" aside.

He was spurred on by a ravenous hunger. He must get out of this place somehow, although it seemed impossible. Kutsi, however, was not one to give up, even when the situation was hopeless.

Overcoming his pain and stomach spasms, he crawled over the stone floor, convinced that the Wall would bar his way. He could not believe the evidence of his own eyes when he saw a gap in it. After the battle of the brain biocurrents, when Yar Alt had mentally been trying to open the door and Lua to close it, no one had ordered the automatic system to close up the Wall. Also still open were the next two barriers through which Yar Alt had hurried and through which the dying Mother Lua had managed to crawl on her hands and knees.

At the familiar turn in the palace gardens, which Kutsi was hoping to reach, his way was barred by a high wall. He crawled off along Lua's bloody trail. He would crawl a little way, stop out of exhaustion and then carry on further. And still Kutsi Merc was alive!

During the few hours that had elapsed,

the spaceship *Quest* had lifted off from Cape Farewell. Yar Judi himself had gone down into the deep underground bunker to begin the disintegration war on which he had finally decided.

The palace was empty. After switching off the energy that fed the palace's automatic systems, the security robots carried a heavy box with slits on it down into the shelter.

And now the Wall in front of Kutsi Merc trembled slightly. He managed to insert his fingers into the gap and, to his great surprise, was able to assure himself that the Wall was yielding to his pressure. Finally, it parted enough for him to crawl through.

Then, without understanding how, he got to his feet and leaned back against the Wall. It trembled again and moved. Kutsi Merc fell down. (The power supply had been switched on again.)

Kutsi lay there gritting his teeth and trying to understand what had happened. He suddenly realised that the disintegration war was beginning and that he had failed to prevent it nevertheless.

He forced himself to rise to his feet. Everything went dark. He screwed up his eyes and stood swaying slightly, then supported himself by holding onto the priceless wood panelling on the walls. It finally led him out into the garden, fragrant with the Dictator's celebrated flowerbeds. Kutsi felt very much like lying down and dying. He had even stopped thinking about food.

He decided that the disintegration war

had evidently not yet broken out. He couldn't hear any explosions, which meant that he must go on living! He did not allow himself to remain lying on the sand in the avenue, but crawled on until he was able to stand up from the kneeling position. He wanted to get to the Blood Door, hoping that it, too, would be open. He was right, and he crawled into the ruined shrine. He could wait there till dark in the familiar niche and at night he could make his way to the aged Nepts, a couple who were friendly with Kutsi's parents. They lived in a former miners' settlement near Pleasure City. Their youngest daughter, Lada, was married to a roundhead who had been educated in Danjab. They had flown to Space Station Deimo together.

Only Kutsi Merc, with his insatiable lust for life, could have made it to the Nepts that night.

When he entered their home, he collapsed on the floor in a dead faint.

The solicitous old couple, both overweight, flabby and white-haired, looking very much like one another as is often the case with a married pair who have lived together for a long time, carried his heavy, bleeding body across the room with difficulty and laid it down on some bedding in the corner.

Kutsi Merc had overlooked the fact that the cover of his "hump" had been riddled with bullet-holes and the subterranean air had been leaking into the charge. Although the detonator had not been activated, it was

sure to explode after a time because of contact with the air.

That explosion was being awaited with terror by Ruler Dobr Mar, who was tired of guessing when it might happen. By destroying the anti-torpedo defence, the explosion would be the signal for a strike, with no chance of retaliation, against Powermania by rockets armed with disintegration warheads, as was desired by the proprietors who had put Dobr Mar in power.

Against any possible emergency, Dobr Mar had taken refuge in a deep bunker, still hoping that Kutsi Merc would be killed before he could detonate his "hump" and that the war desired by the Great Circle of proprietors would be postponed for a time. The Ruler of Danjab was preparing for a war, but he was afraid of it.

Above all, he wanted the disintegration weapon to stay where it was and things to settle down somehow ... at least, until the next election.

Deep down below, a luxurious government office had been reproduced in every detail, circular in shape with a vaulted ceiling and highly placed oval windows that looked out on nothing. The communications monitors had been mounted underneath them.

Dobr Mar had changed. His face had lost its hardness and his eyes their penetration. He had become garrulous and seemed to be justifying himself to someone all the time. He even said to one of his military leaders,

with the intention of making it known to everyone:

"History will not forget the Ruler who started the disintegration war. Is that not so?" And he stared past the other man.

Dobr Mar was troubled by Ave Mar's sudden departure for outer space, not because of his son's fate, but because of Kutsi Merc. Why had the man allowed that flight? And what had become of him? Had he really perished in the end?

But everything turned out differently from what Dobr Mar had been expecting, and not as his enemy, Dictator Yar Judi, had planned. Nor as the proprietors of the Great Circle or of the Blood Council had planned.

The moment came when the fuse in Kutsi Merc's artificial hump functioned of its own accord. A deep underground disintegration explosion took place.

Kutsi Merc, who had been sitting on the Nepts' bedding, felt himself hurled upwards. The floor of the cabin shook, the crockery rattled on the rickety shelves and the portrait of Dictator Yar Judi fell down from its place on the wall. The transparent film in the window was torn apart and a violent gust of wind blew into the humble room, overturning the table. The sheets of paper covered with writing over which old Nept had bent his back, having taken it into his head to learn to write in his declining years, began whirling about in mid-air.

Kutsi Merc cringed as he waited for the

blast. But the ceiling did not collapse. Kutsi limped over to the window.

Nothing, apparently, had happened. But there was no sign of the black spire over the Temple of Eternity.

One of Kutsi Merc's eyebrows shot up. The left side of his face smiled, the other remained watchful. Suddenly, his face grew longer, his eyes widened and he turned pale.

Directly in front of the window, an enormous flowerbed rose up in the centre of the square and out from underneath it glided a smooth cylindrical body with a pointed nose. It grew taller before Kutsi Merc's eyes and became a lofty tower. A moment later, black smoke began billowing from the shaft hidden underneath and the tower began to rise on a column of fire. Then it detached itself from the square, gained height and set course for the ocean. Soon, the rear end of the rocket turned into a fiery cross which steadily diminished to a tiny glittering star. Only then did it vanish altogether.

Kutsi Merc's hair stood on end. He already knew that not only here, but at a thousand other points on the continent, from identical subterranean shafts, from under the surface of the seas, perhaps even from buildings, terrible rockets were bursting forth to head in a deadly swarm for Danjab.

Kutsi Merc was right. Activated by the automatic systems, the rockets had indeed burst out of their hiding places and, programmed to hit the vital points of Danjab, were speeding across the ocean. One of those

rockets rose from the multistorey block in which Ave and Kutsi had been staying, and another was to soar straight up from the Temple of Eternity, where it had been camouflaged as one of the columns. The temple had collapsed at the subterranean explosion of Kutsi's "hump". However, the Central Automatic Defence Console, which was at a great depth, had not been damaged. Its sensitive instruments, only just detecting the radiation caused by the disintegration explosion, immediately sent their signals to thousands of rocket installations.

Dictator Yar Jupi was terrified when the bunker shook. He learned from the instruments about the explosion and the response of the automatic systems and he realised that the disintegration war had begun earlier than he had intended. He rushed up and down the cramped shelter. He craved action. But it had all been done without him.

He was alone. No one could see him except the mindless secretary box which was unable to appreciate the Dictator's joy and triumph. Forgetful of his personal fears, he giggled and danced about. He was filled with a delicious excitement at the knowledge that in a short time the cities and industrial centres of Danjab would be destroyed and tens, perhaps hundreds of millions of enemy Faetians would cease to exist. He had never experienced a pleasure like this before. Now that the war had started, let it spread! He had achieved his aim: to command life and death

over the whole of the planet Faena! And so, grimacing because of a nervous tic, he pulled back the curtain in front of the live screens.

The questioning and distraught faces of the military leaders were staring at him from them. Yar Jupi directed a mad glare at the servile faces and, foaming at the mouth in a burst of inspiration, he screamed:

"What? You weren't expecting it? You were marking time? Well, hear this. I've done it! I! I've blown up the Temple of Eternity and the palace to activate the automatic systems! What? Are you frightened?"

He ran round the bunker, shouting, although the screens were blacking out one after another. The military leaders were obviously not in agreement with their lord and master and preferred to take cover as quickly as possible in their bunkers, which were similar to the Dictator's own. When the secret screens of the Blood Council's members were switched on, they revealed the unhooded, frightened faces of the first proprietors of the ancient continent.

The barbarians' rockets went above the limits of the atmosphere as they flew over the ocean. Their approach was spotted at once by the ever-vigilant automatic observers far from the targets to which the rockets were flying. Without any help from the military or from Ruler Dobr Mar, the rocket defence system went automatically into action. A flock of defence missiles soared up from Danjab and headed for the disinte-

gration armada. They were themselves packed with disintegration warheads intended to explode when close to any missiles that flew towards them.

And the disintegration explosions occurred one after another in the upper layers of the atmosphere, over the ocean. The shock waves threw the rockets off course or simply destroyed them. Mangled fragments and sometimes even whole torpedoes fell into the ocean, to the great horror of seafarers from both continents. It was as if a meteorite shower had plunged into the ocean, raising to the cloudy sky columns of water like the weird trees of a forest that had suddenly sprung up in the sea.

Over eight hundred rockets were destroyed by Danjab's automatic sentinels. But over two hundred continued on their way.

During those first moments of the disintegration war, not a single Faetian took part except for the wounded Kutsi Merc. Not one Faetian was killed in that appalling battle of the rockets.

But this was only during the first few moments.

Soon, Danjab began to tremble under disintegration explosions in hundreds of different places.

A disintegration explosion!

Is there anything to compare with it? Perhaps only the supernovas or the mysterious processes which astronomers have observed on Sol, when enormous tongues of white-hot matter have been ejected over

distances many times greater than the star's diameter.

Matter itself was disintegrating, part of it was ceasing to be matter, its mass was diminishing. The energy of the internal bonds was being unleashed and, converted into heat energy according to the laws of nature, was raising the heat level at the place of disintegration by a factor of millions. All the surrounding matter that remained as matter was instantly converted into white-hot gas that shot out in all directions, wiping out everything in its path. But even faster was the action of the radiation that accompanies the disintegration of matter. Penetrating living tissue, its impact was fatal. Even long after the explosion, the impact of those rays was to destroy all who had survived the fire-storm or the devastating hurricane.

On the site of each disintegration explosion, a fireball rose up first, immeasurably brighter than Sol itself. Light of such brilliance had never been known on the gloomy planet Faena. This brilliant ball became a pillar of fire that rose up like the white trunk of a magic, gigantic tree, growing up and soaring into the sky, where it spread out in a swirling canopy.

Shuddering, Dobr Mar saw on the communications monitors those ominous mushrooms sprouting on the sites of flourishing cities.

He was appalled. As he paced round his study, he felt himself keeling over; his knees buckled and he slumped into an armchair, scarcely able to clutch hold of it.

What had happened? How had the enemy anticipated him? What about Kutsi?

What had become of the Faetians who were to elect him for another term? They were dead, dead! Thousands, maybe millions, maybe hundreds of millions had ceased to exist!

The military leaders rushed into his office and hastened to help the old Faetian with the shaking head... He was groaning; his left leg was twitching, but his right leg, like his arm, had gone numb.

The military leaders bustled about the circular office and sent for the Sister of Health. They tried to pour water and broke the tumblers. No one was yet capable of understanding the full gravity of the position.

The disintegration war, when they mentioned it, sounded like something horrible but impossible, like a children's fairy tale. Even now, when the ominous mushrooms could be seen on nearly all the monitors in the bunker and many of the screens were black and not working, the scurrying Faetians still didn't want to believe that it was all over up above. It was somewhere far away, but here, what was close and visible was the Ruler's weakness, the Sister of Health fussing over him and the unpleasant odour of medicines.

The dejected military leaders made no decisions and issued no orders.

Once again, commands were given by automatic systems.

Dictator Yar Judi, who had not such secret communications with the enemy continent like those maintained by Kutsi Merc through the roundheads did not suspect that Danjab had no less reliable a "retaliation system" than the Superiors.

Instruments recording the disintegration radioactivity in the air, the seismic effects of the explosions on Danjab territory and the force of the heat blasts, gave firing commands to countless rocket installations, also camouflaged on the seabed, in deep mine shafts and in mountain gorges. An armada of vengeance had already set off to fly across the ocean to Powermania.

Only Kutsi Merc had foreseen this. No sooner had the coloured, swirling cloud risen up before his eyes than he managed to dive into a disused shaft in which Nept had worked all his life and over which, when it was exhausted, he had built his own cabin. Kutsi Merc took cover in a narrow stone well down which he climbed by means of damp metal rungs.

His weakness seemed to have passed off. Nervous tension had given him back his strength.

He couldn't see anything any more, but could hear and, it seemed, felt with every cell in his body the terrible explosion that rocked the vicinity. Stones rained down on Kutsi; one of them struck him painfully on the shoulder. But Kutsi clung convulsively to the rungs. Even now, he refused to give in.

Chapter Five

CRATERS IN THE WILDERNESS

The exultant and triumphant news about the outbreak of a disintegration war was picked up by Ala Veg on Space Station Deimo.

Terribly frightened, unable to believe her own eyes, she read the automatically taped report in which there was news of disintegration strike unleashed on Danjab, the continent of the Culturals, about the extermination of tens of millions of the enemy, if not more.

With the sole feeling that the explosions had fortunately taken place on the other continent and her children were alive, Ala Veg ran out to report about this terrible event to Mrak Luton, the station commander.

He did not admit her. Puffed up and pompous, as if his office had been invaded by dozens of Faetians awaiting an audience, he made Ala Veg stand for a long time outside the door before he let her in.

He glanced over the proffered papers, stood up and shouted hoarsely:

"Joy! This means happiness for us! May they be without end, the cycles in the blissful life of Dictator Yar Jupi! At last it has come to pass! The continent of Danjab is being cleansed of the scum that settled there!"

Nega Luton ran in and, after a glance at the papers, threw her arms round Ala Veg's neck.

"What happiness, my dear! At last our mission here is being accomplished and the roundheads needn't move to this accursed Mar, but will be settled on the newly available spaces of Faena. I've been so homesick for comforts, services and refined society. Haven't you too, my dear?"

Ala Veg seemed turned to stone.

"Is the disintegration war over already?" was all she could manage to say.

"Not yet, of course!" announced Mrak Luton portentously, "but this war will be won by whoever delivers the most devastating salvo. And we are going to do the same too."

"Who are 'we'?" asked Ala Veg incomprehendingly.

Mrak Luton sounded the general alarm and left his office for the big cabin next door in which Mada and Ave had stayed only recently.

Soon, the entire crew of the space station was assembled there. The timid Tycho Veg came, as did the flustered, out-of-breath Brat and Lada Lua.

Mrak Luton read out the news concerning the annihilation of Danjab's main cities.

Nega Luton closely watched the expressions on the faces of those present. She did not miss Brat Lua's horror. His now pale face was like polished bone. Lada Lua burst into tears.

"I will not tolerate treachery," Mrak Luton shouted at her, "even if it expresses itself in pity for the enemy. I order an automatic ship to be sent to Phobo immediately."

"What? To the enemy?" said Nega Luton in astonishment.

"With a disintegration warhead," explained Mrak Luton.

"That's another matter." And Nega Luton sighed with relief.

"The gentle lady should be ashamed to say such things!" Lada Lua could not help saying. "She is a Sister of Health, after all!"

"Silence!" roared Mrak Luton. "Engineer Tycho Veg and assistant servant Brat Lua! In the name of the Dictator, I order you to fit a missile with a disintegration warhead on the station's ship and program it for automatic flight to Phobo."

"A disintegration warhead?" asked Tycho Veg. "But there isn't one on the station."

Mrak Luton roared with laughter so that his flabby jowls quivered.

"Don't be so naive, Engineer Tycho Veg! You will find the warhead in space at the end of the greenhouse to which it was delivered as a spare cabin for the ship."

"I object, profoundly thoughtful Mrak Luton," exclaimed Brat Lua. "The blessed Dictator of Powermania concluded a treaty with the Ruler of Danjab. There cannot be any disintegration weapon in space."

"Treachery!" roared Mrak Luton. "You're under arrest, you roundhead traitor! Engineer Tycho Veg, tie the mutineer's hands!"

Tycho Veg glanced in indecision at his wife.

"If the disintegration war has begun, it

means... Clearly, all treaties are invalid," she said timidly.

Tycho Veg reluctantly obeyed the order. He and Mrak Luton pushed Brat Lua into the chief's office. Mrak Luton locked the door.

"Now proceed to the greenhouse, quickly," he ordered Tycho Veg. "I took measures for the disintegration warhead to be close at hand!.."

With a glance at his wife, Tycho Veg went despondently to the lift-cage.

"I proclaim the station to be in a state of emergency. Any act of disobedience will be dealt with not by arrest, but with a poisoned bullet!" And Mrak Luton brandished his pistol.

"Gentle sir, please spare my husband. He didn't know that the treaty wasn't valid any more," said Lada Lua, rushing up to the station chief.

"Quick march to your stations, all of you!" roared Mrak Luton. "The astronomer Ala Veg will report all space observations to me and maintain electromagnetic communications. But your place, roundhead woman, is in the kitchen."

Mrak Luton collapsed into his armchair, exhausted. His rectangular face with the pendulous jowls went purple, his neck swelled. He tugged at his collar, unable to breathe properly for want of air.

On the other Marian orbit, on the station near Phobo, news of the disintegration war

had been brought by Engineer Vydum (Inventor) Polar. His intelligent face, always keenly alert, now expressed horror and dismay. He had earned his name for an early inclination to invention. He had once built a walking steamcar, had made magnetic fastenings for clothes and sprung running shoes, and had obtained a fine strip of dried wood which in some other age on some other planet would have been called paper. He was invariably assisted by his friend, the talented, always cheerful, small and mercurial craftsman Al Ur, who regarded Vydum as an unrecognised genius. He was with him this time too, and had hurried after him into the station chief's office to back his friend's demands.

There was one more Faetian who had taken note of the unsuccessful inventor. This was Dovol (Content) Sirus, a powerful proprietor. He was not averse to profiting by Vydum Polar's abilities, and, on his wife's advice, had married Vydum to Sveta, his daughter by his first marriage, a mild, quiet girl, totally submissive to her powerful stepmother, who ruled the family with a rod of iron in order to further its social influence.

Dovol Sirus, a sleek, almost bald Faetian with heavy features and thin lips, took fright on meeting Vydum Polar.

Usually genial, always ready to agree with the other person, he was the personification of prosperity, sufficiency and equanimity. But his peace of mind had now been shat-

tered. His small eyes darted here and there almost in dismay. When he heard Vydum Polar's news, he promptly sent out a call for the greenhouse nurserywoman, his wife Vlasta Sirius.

Vydum Polar passionately tried to drive his point home to the station chief.

"I am prepared personally to take a ship to Deimo, and I am prepared to take my wife and Mila Ur. Her husband will stay behind with you to look after the machinery. Space has been declared peaceful. The war of disintegration that has just broken out is our common misfortune: we must share it with the personnel on Deimo."

Dovol Sirius nodded his agreement, glancing at the door from time to time.

Sveta was his favourite.

On the insistence of his vociferous wife Vlasta, Dovol Sirius had made use on Faena of the pre-war jitters to acquire influence over Dobr Mar in Danjab. He had even obtained the rank of general from him. True, when a disintegration war became imminent, Vlasta Sirius made General Sirius get as far away from Faena as possible and become chief of a space station, taking his step-daughter with him and her luckless husband.

"You'll fly from here, but what about us?" asked Dovol Sirius uncertainly.

"We'll come back as soon as we've discussed with our unfortunate brothers from Faena what's to be done next..."

"What's the meaning of all this gadding about?" came the fruity voice of Vlasta Sirius

as she entered the room. "I shall never let Sveta go. I am as a mother to her."

"But, my dear—" objected the station chief.

"What if the people on Deimo take our ship for a torpedo? They've got defence rockets too, you know."

"But, my dear..."

"'My dear, my dear!'" mimicked Vlasta. "We have a daughter we love. She must be rescued. By any possible means."

Vlasta Sirius cast a withering glance at her husband from under knitted brows and compressed her thin lips.

"But my dear... I promise you. Our ship will surely fly to Station Deimo. And you and I, you and I only, will appoint the crew members."

Vlasta Sirius slapped the table with the flat of her hand.

"Exactly—you and I. And that will be the most reliable crew! We must preserve our lives! Preserve them! In this war, what matters most is to survive!" And she ran a glare of hatred over all three Faetians. "To survive!"

Helplessly wringing his hands, Brat Lua was pacing up and down inside the office that was now his prison.

Tycho Veg was uncomplainingly carrying out his assignment without even giving a thought to the possibility that the disintegration warhead in the spare cabin might be inadequately screened and dangerous to any Faetian who approached it.

To get to the spare cabin, he had to float all the way along the greenhouse through the air-roots that seemed to be trying to hold him back. But he pulled his weightless body forward by clutching at them so as to carry out as quickly as possible the chief's order, which had been confirmed by a nod from Ala Veg. He tried not to think about his children's fate, as he tried not to think about anything at all: neither the Faetians on Station Phobo, nor himself. In spite of himself, however, he was thinking that there were only two spaceships at the station. Would six people be able to fly to their native planet in one ship? Of course not! It was only a three-seater. Evidently, they would have to wait for another ship from Faena.

The spare cabin, which resembled a conical cap, was floating not far from the long cigar of the ship, to which it was attached by a cable.

Tycho Veg put on his space-suit and, securing himself with a line, kicked himself off from the greenhouse airlock and floated off into the silvery darkness of space.

He miscalculated and did not reach his goal straightway. He had to wind himself back by pulling in the line hand over hand and then push off again.

This time, he propelled himself with one leg only so as to give his jump better direction.

The spare cabin looked rough to him, like a meteorite. Tycho Veg clung to it and crawled towards the base of the cone, where

the cable to the spaceship was secured.

He seized hold of the metal bracket outside the spare cabin and taking up the cable that ran to the ship, began pulling it towards him together with the cabin. After a short time, the cabin came into contact with the ship. Tycho Veg had steeled himself for a tough job. To his great astonishment, however, he noticed that the parts of the ship had been designed for instant replacement. It only needed one contact with the joint for the automatic machinery inside to be activated and for the old cabin to detach itself easily from this ship and sail away towards the stars. The new cabin fitted itself into place with the same ease.

Tycho Veg crawled inside to set the automatic pilot.

Another surprise awaited him inside: there was no need for him to readjust the settings.

The impersonal voice of the automatic machine warned him about this the moment he touched the control panel. All he had to do was to switch on the automatic pilot and go back to the greenhouse.

As soon as he was there, he saw the rocket's nozzles begin blazing; after making a precisely calculated turn, the ship headed for Phobo on a course that had been unerringly checked by the machines.

Tycho Veg sighed. He had only been doing his duty. He never even gave a thought to whether the warhead had been properly screened.

When he emerged from the lift-cage into the station corridor, he was met by a pale and trembling Ala Veg.

"What's happened, darling?" asked Tycho.

"Our children... Children..." was all that she could say, and she burst into tears.

She was holding in her hands a tablet inscribed with the latest news by electromagnetic communication. Tycho read it and swayed, resting his hand on the lift-cage door.

The news was that flocks of disintegration torpedoes from Danjab had descended on the continent of the Superiors. There had been devastation and casualties... But Yar Judi foresaw victory and demanded rejoicing.

Mrak Luton ran into the corridor, waving his arms.

"The Dictator is alive! The Dictator is alive! The Blood Council is continuing the struggle! To your stations! This is a space outpost!"

"Can our observer be in her place?" sneered Nega Luton, who had appeared after him. "She should be worrying about her relatives, not about winning the war."

Her eyes flashing, Ala Veg went into the observatory.

Tycho Veg was left standing in the corridor. He just couldn't make sense of what was happening; he just couldn't believe that his native Pleasure City might be lying in ruins, and his children...

He followed his wife into the observatory.

"I can't keep watch because of my tears,"

said Ala Veg as she turned to him. "Take my place at the instrument. A strange star has appeared in that quarter."

"Could it be our ship with the warhead?"

"No, it's somewhere else."

Tycho began helping his wife and they soon established that the unknown star was not obeying the usual laws of celestial mechanics and seemed to be choosing its own flight trajectory.

Summoned by the alarm signal, Mrak Luton rushed into the observatory and peered suspiciously at Tycho and Ala Veg.

"News from Faena? Orders from the Dictator? An instruction from the Blood Council?"

"No," replied Ala Veg. "Communications have broken down. We have also lost contact with Station Phobo."

"With Phobo?" bellowed Mrak Luton. "Treachery? Who dared to communicate with Phobo, the enemy fortress in space?" He drew his pistol and brandished it threateningly at them.

"I am simply reporting that communications with them do not exist. The former channel has gone dead, as if something had happened there."

"It hasn't happened yet! But it soon will! Are you watching our torpedo's flight?"

"It's flying dead on course, but..."

"What else?"

"It's being intercepted by an unidentified ship. Apparently from Phobo. It seems to be heading for us. Is it possible that the sta-

tion personnel have packed and are flying to us?"

Mrak Luton roared with laughter.

"So as to surrender? To dump themselves on us? To gobble up our food supplies? To breathe our oxygen? Or do they want to escape the punitive torpedo?"

"But they might not know we sent it."

"But I know their ship's coming our way. Engineer Tycho Veg, I order you to fire a defence rocket. The approaching ship must be destroyed."

"What d'you mean 'destroyed'?" protested Ala Veg. "Mightn't there be living Faetians on board?"

"Living Faetians?" jeered Mrak Luton. "As if there were living Faetians flying in our ship with the warhead! I've issued my orders. Send out defence rockets, knock it out, destroy it!" Mrak Luton stamped his foot in a frenzy and brandished his pistol.

Tycho Veg left the observatory. He knew where the defence rockets were. They were not covered by the Agreement on Peace in Outer Space. They were short-range missiles and could not reach another station, but they were capable of locating in space and destroying the target approaching Deimo.

To activate these defence weapons, Tycho Veg did not have to descend into the greenhouse. It was enough to go to Station Deimo's Central Console.

He fired the defence rockets when the ship from Station Phobo was clearly distinguishable as a point glittering in Sol's rays.

He returned to his wife in the observatory, looking dejected and drained of his strength. He felt he had done something dreadful.

Ala Veg could not hold back her tears.

"There are Faetians on board, there could be living Faetians on board," she kept repeating. "And no news from Faena."

"Our children can't possibly have been killed," said Tycho Veg, who had no grounds whatever for such a statement.

He squinted through the eyepiece and saw something flare up in space like a nova. One of defence rockets had exploded on encountering the ship from Phobo.

On the big screen displaying the image, the ship-star plunged steeply after the explosion towards the surface of Mar. It had been knocked out of orbit by the force of the blast, but not destroyed.

All the Faetians on the station assembled in the observatory, except for the imprisoned Brat Lua.

Mrak Luton personally came to fetch him.

"Let him watch!" he said, pushing Lua into the observatory and showing him the mass of Mar in the porthole. "Let him watch with his own eyes!"

"Are you so sure that'll knock some sense into him?" asked Nega Luton quietly.

Her husband grinned complacently.

"I know the inner world of the Faetians too well to be wrong. Otherwise I wouldn't be Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard."

The six Faetians on Deimo saw another star flare up in space and go out again.

"They've knocked out our torpedo!" And Mrak Luton stamped his foot.

Then, on the surface of Mar, two disintegration explosions occurred in succession. In the russet deserts, the trunks of fabulous trees could be seen from space as they soared up into the sky, billowing out into swirling canopies. The distinct shadows of first one and then a second gigantic mushroom lay across the sandy wilderness.

"What did I tell you!" roared Mrak Luton. "They wanted to be the first to wipe us out. Their ship with its warhead exploded first. But you were just whining, you were talking about living Faetians."

"The station chief is right," sighed Tycho Veg. "He can see into the Faetian soul."

"Engineer Tycho Veg! Stop drivelling! I know what I'm worth! Go back to the greenhouse at once and fit one more ship with a torpedo."

"But we won't have any more ships left," said Tycho in an attempt at protest.

"Victory! Victory at all costs! A ship will be sent for us as heroes of the disintegration war from the triumphant continent of the Superiors."

"To hear is to obey," said Tycho Veg with a covert glance at Ala Veg.

But she sat with bowed head, her hands dangling down in despair.

Tycho Veg left to set up another ship-torpedo.

However, this second missile was also knocked out by defence rockets fired by the

Culturals on Phobo.

A second volley of defence rockets was launched from Deimo to beat off yet another ship that was glittering in the rays of Sol and might also have been primed with a disintegration warhead.

Both ships, the one from Phobo and the one from Deimo, blew up almost side by side in the deserts of Mar. First, monstrous mushrooms on stalks of smoke rose up on the site of the explosions, and then, when the smoke had dispersed, it was possible to see from above craters in the deserts of Mar which had not been there before.

"How amazed the astronomers would be," said Ala Veg in a sinking voice, "if they found craters like that on Mar."

Tycho did not react at all to these words. He had barely reached the Central Console from which he had been discharging the defence rockets. He was feeling really ill this time. It seemed to him that there had been children flying to them in the ships and that they had been killed.

Chapter Six

JUDGEMENT

Sheltering in the deep abandoned mine-shaft, Kutsi Merc had survived the disintegration blast. The thunder above had long since died away.

It was damp underfoot. The raindrops were

falling from above as if counting the moments. It seemed to Kutsi that they were measuring out infinite time. He sat there without strength or thoughts, dozing or in a faint. Only hunger made him rise to his feet. But he was afraid to see what awaited him above; he was afraid even to imagine it.

The raindrops were falling noisily, the only sounds to indicate that the world still existed. The world? What world? Dead puddles and dead raindrops?

His ravenous hunger drove Kutsi up the slippery metal rungs. Some of them wobbled. Kutsi could fall to the bottom of the well. And it would all be over.

But the metal rungs held.

There was a little blue circle high up above. Strange! The Nepts' cabin had been built directly over the mine-shaft.

The sky! With stars in it! Was it really night?

Kutsi climbed on upwards. The circle above him was growing bigger and brighter, and the stars were gradually disappearing. But certainly not because day was breaking. It was simply the effect of a darkened chimney, when stars are visible from the bottom in the daytime. The circle overhead was growing bigger while they were disappearing. Kutsi climbed out on to the surface.

Sol was at its zenith. The Nepts' cabin no longer existed. It had evidently been blown away when the stones were falling on to his shoulders.

The Faetian looked round and was dumb-

founded. Not only had the Nepts' cabin disappeared, not a single roundhead shack was left standing. Everything around had been turned into an enormous refuse tip of garbage, pathetic kitchen utensils, smashed furniture and rubble. A jagged wall rose at an angle in the distance.

Kutsi made his way over to it. And immediately stumbled on the first corpses. The Faetians had been killed by the windstorm that had followed the disintegration explosion. Many were buried under the wreckage of their shacks, many had been carried through the air and dashed against any solid object in their way.

That was what had happened to the old Nept couple. Kutsi recognised their mangled bodies by their clothes.

A chill ran up and down Kutsi's spine. He had heard plenty about the disintegration weapon, but had never imagined that it would look like this after an explosion.

The wall he had reached proved to be part of some huge workshops in a suburb of Pleasure City. The building had collapsed, burying machines and the Faetians who worked in it. In its place towered an ugly pile of rubble.

Had no one survived at all?

Kutsi Merc's two hearts were thudding painfully in his breast and his temples throbbed accordingly. Why had the wounded one recovered?

Himself not knowing why, perhaps in the hope of meeting at least one living Faetian,

Kutsi began wandering round Pleasure City.

His hunger, dulled by the initial horror, made itself felt again. Kutsi's mind was in shock, and instinct was forcing him to look for something edible in the mass of rubble.

Two mountainous ramparts rose like grey barchans on either side of what had been a street. In one place, under the fused stones, he thought he saw food containers. He began digging into the pile and came upon a protruding hand. He could not force himself to dig any further and went on between the dunes of ash-covered rubble.

He had the feeling that he was wandering along an enormous dump of builders' rubble.

Kutsi had never thought that the devastation could be so complete. It was even impossible to make out the shapes of former buildings. There could be no thought of finding something to eat in this pile of rubble.

Kutsi was suffering the torments of hunger. And this combination of horror with the pangs of hunger was unnatural. He was disgusting even to himself.

However, a more powerful emotion was beginning to get the better of Kutsi.

Who was to blame for what had been done? Who had made a war of disintegration the purpose of his doctrine? Who had turned the continent into such a wilderness strewn with ashes?

Kutsi was overcome by a frenzied hatred of Dictator Yar Jupi; it flooded his whole being, it overshadowed everything that he had known, even the stipulations which the

Great Circle of the proprietors had made about unleashing a disintegration war and which he had once reported to Dobr Mar. Kutsi Merc had failed to carry out his mission! The automatic systems console was intact. Yar Jupi had begun the disintegration war first!

When he climbed up the cone of rubble, Kutsi saw the ocean. Its shore was disfigured by a gigantic crater, now flooded with sea water. A torpedo had evidently exploded in the port. The enormous crater was ringed by a rampart that had covered part of the ruins. Clouds of sand and ooze had been thrown up from the seabed into the air during the explosion and had then fallen as dry ash onto the ruins.

Hatred, horror and the hopelessness of his position drove Kutsi further on. The results of a shock wave are freakish. In one place, he stumbled on the cross-section of a rocky hill with window openings and shapeless patches. When he went closer, Kutsi saw a pile of scrap iron driven into a wall.

In front of him he saw the wreckage of a steamcar that had been passing that way at the time of the explosion.

Nearby, on the fused stone, shone patches vaguely suggestive of Faetians.

Kutsi shuddered: "The white shadows of passers-by!" The pedestrians themselves had been vapourised by the incredible heat, but their shadows had been imprinted by the exploding star right there on the wall where the outlines, the mangled images of those who

not long ago had been living human beings now showed up as lighter, less fused areas on the wall...

Kutsi could not bear it any longer. He ran back. His foot struck a stone that rolled over the slag of the roadway. A smashed jar of something edible! He picked it up. It proved to be carbon inside. The unprecedented heat had coked the contents, converting it into a black, coagulated mass.

Kutsi wanted to get to the central quarters of the city. But he already knew what he was going to see there: shadows on the walls, if the stones had not been piled into shapeless heaps, and endless ramparts of rubble...

Then Kutsi made a decision. What he had been through had clouded his mind. Not a single Faetian in possession of his faculties would have decided on the crazy plan that hatched out in Kutsi's inflamed brain.

Kutsi knew that he was doomed: the deadly radiation had long since penetrated his body. It would soon begin to make itself felt. There was very little time left. He had no hope of survival whatever! Nor had he any desire to live among the dead.

However, he considered himself under obligation to do his last duty.

With his characteristic determination, he went back across the heaps of rubble to the Great Shore where, not so long ago, a sea wave had brought Ave and Mada together.

The further away he was from the site of the explosion, the more hope there was of finding something to eat. A house lizard

with charred skin was lying under a wall just like the bodies of the Nepts. The affectionate, quick-moving, nimble lizard had, of course, been a general favourite of the dead couple.

Kutsi laughed bitterly. The Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard had met him on the ship and had called him a carrion-eater. Had it occurred to the man that he would prove to be right?

Only at night did Kutsi reach the Temple of Eternity, or rather the mountain of stones lying where it had once stood. If his "hump" had been the cause of the explosion, then it might be possible to find a way into the underground by way of the crater.

Kutsi was certain that the electric power system had been put out of action and that the automatic doors would not be working.

He proved right in one respect and wrong in the other.

Only in the morning did he manage to find the way into the deep corridor where the explosion had occurred. The gallery was less cluttered with stones than everything else around, since the gases had shot out of it as from a gun-barrel.

Kutsi's frenzied will-power helped him to dig out the entrance into the underground where he had been "killed" by Yar Alt.

His old self again, Kutsi made his way like a spy along the walls, lighting his path with a pocket torch. But suddenly a bright light came on of its own accord. Kutsi Merc

was overjoyed at this, but he was also frightened by it. If the supply to the underground rooms was still working, he would not be able to get through the closed walls. Yar Jupi was still alive. He was still sending disintegration torpedoes against Danjab. Kutsi Merc had no right to retreat.

A blank wall rose up in front of him. When Kutsi had crawled outside from there, the walls had been divided, which meant that this must be another route leading to the Dictator's underground Lair.

Kutsi Merc tried in vain to separate the walls, driving into a chink a piece of metal he had picked out on the surface.

Beads of cold sweat started up on his brow. He could not back out, he simply could not do it! He fixed a glare full of hatred at the spiral ornament on the accursed wall.

The wall divided.

Kutsi was well versed in the technology of automatic machines that could memorise the brain biocurrents. He instantly realised that they had been programmed to a particularly strong character trait of the chosen Faetians. For Yar Jupi himself, whom all automatic machines had, of course, to obey, the predominant characteristic was *hatred*. It was answered by the "blood doors", which were also tuned to Mada's kindly nature and that of her nanny. But Kutsi's hatred now was evidently not inferior to that of the Dictator himself. And so the automatic machines of the Lair went into action.

Kutsi ran along the illuminated corridor. Each time the wall barred his way, Kutsi's glare of hatred opened it.

After a steep downward slope, the corridor made a turn, emerging into a spacious apartment reminiscent of a palace hall with a vaulted ceiling. There was no furniture in it except for a huge cupboard with shining vertical slits.

Two enormous robots with cubic heads and articulated tentacles came rushing straight at him.

Kutsi guessed that he must have reached his goal. The Dictator's bunker!

Hatred made Kutsi Merc invincible. He rushed at the robots, ordering them to follow him. And the robots obeyed, programmed to respond to the Dictator's principal emotion.

Kutsi Merc stopped before the secretary-box, not admitting to himself that it might refuse to obey him.

"Open the study door!" he commanded, fixing his gaze on the machine's glowing slits.

The machinery of the Faetians was so sophisticated that it detected their moods. This height of development had its vulnerable side.

The secretary-box, manufactured in Danjab, was simply a machine always obedient to the will of its owner, the Dictator of Powermania. It now recognised this will in Kutsi and obeyed it.

The door to Yar Judi's study opened.

Yar Judi jumped up from the table and stared in terror at the burly stranger with a wrestler's neck and a sneer on his face.

"Who are you?" shouted the Dictator, shaking from head to foot.

"Your judge," replied Kutsi coldly, advancing on him.

If Yar Judi had not been in such a panic fear of living Faetians and had not kept them at a distance, Kutsi's plan would not have worked. But this time Kutsi was face to face with the Dictator in person.

"Robots! Security robots!" yelled Yar Judi in a voice hoarse with terror.

The robots ran in, ready for action.

"Tie his hands together!"

It was not Yar Judi, but Kutsi who gave the order in a voice full of hatred.

Yar Judi raged, screamed and ordered the robots to obey him, but his brain was radiating terror, not the hatred so familiar to the robots.

The robots unthinkingly bound the Dictator's hands.

"You are the greatest criminal of all time!" announced Kutsi Merc, standing before the helpless Dictator. He considered himself the only one who had survived to act on behalf of all the victims. "I bear within me the hatred of all the victims of your criminal doctrine, whose goal you made destruction and whose meaning was hatred. But there is a hatred greater than yours. I bring that hatred down on you *in the name of the history of Reason!*"

"I pray you for mercy," whined the Dictator. "Not many are left alive on Faena. I shall work humbly, like the last roundhead; I shall acknowledge the Doctrine of Justice, I shall grow flowers. Just look at the beauty I have raised. Let us go to the niche, let us savour the fragrance of those blossoms together."

"Silence. I shall not let you breathe the scent of your own flowers. Prepare yourself for the most shameful execution of all. I am going to switch on all the monitor screens and before the eyes of your fellows *I am going to hang you!*"

Kutsi Merc tore down the curtains covering the screens. The monitors lit up.

The terrified military leaders and members of the Blood Council watched helplessly from them.

Kutsi deftly pulled a cord out of the curtains, deftly tied a noose, jumped onto the desk and attached the cord to the chandelier hook. The noose dangled directly under the lamps. The table had to be moved aside.

Then Kutsi stood Yar Judi, who was shaking with terror, on the Dictator's chair as if he were no more than a will-less puppet.

The robots moved away, watching the proceedings impassively. Kutsi noticed that on several screens the military leaders had covered their eyes with their hands, while on the others, the Faetians, with their cowls thrown back, were watching the progress of the execution with malignant glee.

"In the name of History," announced

Kutsi Merc, and he kicked the chair from under the Dictator's feet.

Dobr Mar only came round from time to time, half-recumbent in the Ruler's chair and in a far from comfortable position.

All the screens in the bunker were dead. The lamps of the emergency lighting glowed dully.

The military leaders and the anguished Sister of Health were still fussing over the Ruler. Her name was Vera Fae. All her family had perished up above: father, mother, husband, three daughters—all except her son, who had flown to Terr with a space expedition. Vera Fae was in despair. She could find strength only in attending to the sick Ruler.

Dobr Mar had lost the power of speech. His tongue, right hand and right leg were paralysed. He could only communicate with his eyes. Vera Fae alone could understand him.

Haggard, her hair turned white in the last few hours, with tear-stained eyes, she had not lost the gentle touch and warm voice of the doctor—all that the Ruler could respond to.

There was no one to take over from him. The "Ruler's friend", who was supposed to do so according to the law, had been killed up above, like millions of other Faetians.

The military leaders announced through Vera Fae that the reserve torpedoes had been expended. But barbarians' torpedoes were still showering down on their own continent, leaving a scene of total devastation.

The Ruler made an attempt to move. The Sister of Health looked into his eyes, trying to read his thoughts.

The chief of the disintegration weapons came up. He had been entrusted with that terrible means of aggression because of his known cowardice and reluctance to make his own decisions. Even this time he, too, wanted at all costs the Ruler's written consent to the detonation of the last, superpowerful underwater disintegration device which had been delivered under Kutsi Merc's supervision to the Great Shore, almost to the very place where Ave and Mada had once been surfing.

Dobr Mar could not understand the showily overdressed general who, his voice rising to a falsetto, tried to convince the Sister of Health by saying, "The destruction of the Dictator's underground Lair is our only salvation. Such is the will of the Great Circle."

Dobr Mar wearily closed his eyes.

"He agrees! He agrees!" said the hunch-backed general delightedly.

But Dobr Mar opened his eyes again and, in an effort to say something, stared at his desk.

Vera Fae took some inscribed tablets off it and held them in front of his eyes.

On seeing one of them, Dobr Mar looked down.

Vera Fae showed the tablet to the general.

"I know that!" he screeched like a cockerel. "When he invented the disintegration weapon, the honoured Elder Um Sat wanted to restrict

its use and frightened the Faetians with the apparent prospect of all the planet's oceans being blown up."

Dobr Mar closed his eyes.

"Does Ruler Dobr Mar agree?" persisted the general. "Can the Sister of Health sign on his behalf a document authorising the detonation of the underwater disintegration device?"

"How can I do that if the Ruler himself has reminded us of the great Elder's warning?"

"A naive fabrication! As if all the waters of the oceans, in the event of a superpowerful explosion, would immediately disintegrate, releasing their energy like a supernova. And as if our whole planet would be turned into a tiny supernova."

"Don't you find that terrifying?" asked the Sister of Health.

"What could be more terrifying than what's already happened? The Dictator of Powermania must be stopped at all costs. An underwater explosion by the Great Shore will start an earthquake; it will destroy his bunker down there. The oceanic tidal wave will rise to the heavens, crash down on the Lair and flood it. If the Sister of Health can convince the Ruler, he will agree. His written order is needed for the explosion. He alone is responsible for everything."

The Sister of Health looked into the dim eyes of the sick man. He closed them.

"He agrees, at last he agrees!" howled the general, seizing the Ruler's lifeless hand and applying it to the plate. "Explode it!" shout-

ed the general in a thin voice and, his leg dragging, he ran out of the study, plate in hand.

Dobr Mar watched him go with a frightened look. He wanted to say something, but was unable to.

The Sister of Health came to her senses and tried to stop the general, but the Ruler felt worse and she had to help him, wiping his face that was twisted in a grimace and was covered with beads of sweat.

The general returned. The order had been passed on. The explosion would take place...

"I take no responsibility for anything!" he shouted.

Chapter Seven

THE STAR OF HATRED

Every Sister of Health has something of the mother in her.

Her desire to help a sick man, her maternal attitude to a suffering person, now helpless as a child and therefore as dear to her as if he were her own, were struggling in Mada with a keen, unjustified, as she considered, homesickness.

Unable to understand this feeling and rejecting it, she looked devotedly after Um Sat, whose life was now fading...

With his large beard, his piercing, yearning (for Faena, of course!) eyes, he was lying motionless on his couch. His illness was

delaying the return of *Quest* and intensifying the homesickness that Mada and her colleagues felt for Faena.

As a Sister of Health, however, she had to rise above her personal sufferings and she looked after the Elder, trying to cure his mysterious illness, since a speedy return might mean his salvation. But there could be no thought of that with Um Sat so seriously ill. Mada looked after him devotedly; she was not only a Sister of Health to him, but a spiritual confidante. She admitted to him her yearning for Faena and received in return the Elder's terrible confession that all the oceans on Faena might blow up as a result of a disintegration war. Mada shuddered, frowned and shook her head in protest.

By shouldering part of the Elder's alarm, she eased his condition, affirming that matters could not go as far as such a catastrophe and they would surely go back to their Faena where they were so eagerly awaited.

On Mada's instructions, Ave and Gor Terr went hunting in the forest. She would not let them touch the provisions intended for the return journey.

Return journey! It was a goal, a dream, a passionate desire, and it was not felt by Mada alone.

She told Toni Fae to stay by the electromagnetic communications apparatus which, for some strange reason, had gone silent. The thread linking *Quest* and their native planet had snapped. Mada reassured Toni Fae that the atmosphere of Terr was to

blame: it was blanketing off the electromagnetic waves from Faena and Mar.

Toni Fae was desperate to go home. He could not sleep. He would doze off at the apparatus, then wake up in a cold sweat, now hearing his mother, Vera Fae, calling him, now imagining that it was Ala Veg laughing at him. But the apparatus remained silent. There were times when Toni Fae couldn't bear it any more. Then Mada's gentle hand would rest on his trembling shoulder and her calm, soft voice would assure him that the state of Terr's atmosphere would change; they need only wait, and he would hear the longed-for signal.

Um Sat, however, was not so easily pacified. Mada knew what he thought about a disintegration war and how it had been tormenting him even before they had left Faena.

Ave was gloomy for the same reason.

He was no longer the sensitive youth who had made such an impression on Mada as he rode the ocean waves. He had changed inwardly and outwardly. After growing a moustache and a beard on Terr, he looked much older, calmer, more self-assured and stronger.

Mada knew that by sending her husband out hunting, she was subjecting him to danger. But as she thought about all the crew, she could not act otherwise, for she had faith in his strength, agility and courage.

Consequently, when, apart from a reindeer rescued from a beast of prey, Ave brought back a spotted hide with its jaws

fixed in a snarl, Mada was not surprised, seeing it as only natural.

Ave was morose. He said nothing to Mada, but she knew everything! And she feared not so much the something terrible that could happen out there, perhaps somewhere far away, as for her "children" whom she was looking after here, although these children were Ave, Um Sat, Toni Fae and Gor Terr.

The long-armed and stooping Faetian giant was missing his native planet as badly as everyone else. The primitive mode of life which he and Ave, as the main providers, had to lead here was unpleasant and even offensive to a skilled engineer.

As he wandered through the densely packed tree-trunks on the alien planet, Gor Terr never ceased making grandiose plans for technical improvements that there was no one to implement on Terr: there were neither workshops, nor assistants, and so there could not be any progress or civilisation.

Around them lay the alien, primeval forest. From time to time, they would glimpse antlers or the spotted hide of a predator. Who was going to win?

Gor Terr stubbornly shook his head. No! This life was not for him! He didn't want to be like his ancestors with their clubs and stone axes, however much he might resemble them physically. He was not going to be like the savages of the Stone Age. Let other Faetians colonise other planets, but he was going to return to workshops, steamcars, rockets and skyscrapers!

One starry night, in despair of ever hearing a signal over the electromagnetic communications, Toni Fae began searching among the stars for the faintly visible Faena, as if hoping to see a light signal.

And then he saw one!

The young astronomer couldn't believe his eyes and rushed to the star map. Was he looking at the right place? No, he hadn't made a mistake. Faena should be passing through that particular constellation between Alt and Veg.

The little star had evidently been swamped by the brilliant flare of a supernova. Somewhere immeasurably far away, beyond the fringe of the Galaxy, the latest cosmic disaster had taken place and the light of a once exploding star had finally reached Sol and its planets. And only by chance had the supernova blotted out Faena. He must now wait until the planet, travelling across the sky on a complex path divergent from that of the stars, emerged from the brilliant light of the supernova and began to shine at a distance with its usual faint, but so very dear and appealing light.

The supernova, however, shining more brightly than all the other stars, except for Sol in the daytime, seemed not to want Faena to get away. It was moving across the sky, not like a star, but like a planet...

Toni Fae caught his breath. He started rousing Gor Terr, who simply wouldn't wake up and merely bellowed in his sleep.

Ave Mar woke up and applied his eye to the eyepiece.

Yes, an unusually bright star was blazing in the night sky. It was clearly visible to the naked eye; it was like a lantern in the sky. But there was something in its effulgence that made Toni Fae's heart beat faster in alarm.

Ave understood everything at once. He had long been keeping to himself the secret that Um Sat had entrusted to him about the danger hidden in the oceans. And now out there...

Mada came in from the big cabin in which Um Sat slept. She was as white as a sheet. She had only been suspecting it, but when she looked at her husband, she understood everything.

"My dear Toni Fae," said Mada. "Prepare yourself for the worst. Tell me, is your new star moving across the sky the way Faena should be moving?"

"It doesn't make sense, but it's true."

"Faena doesn't exist any more," said Ave Mar gloomily, and he put his arm round Mada's shoulders.

"To be more precise, the former inhabited Faena doesn't exist any more," corrected Mada. "A star has lit up in its place, but not for long."

Toni Fae looked at Mada and Ave with frightened eyes. He took off his spectacles and methodically wiped the lenses.

"So Faena doesn't exist? And what about Mother?" The young astronomer looked with childlike eyes at Mada, as if she ought to

dispel a terrible dream. "Why hasn't it lit up for long? No! Isn't it just that they've found a way of signalling to us?"

"My dear Toni Fae, it really is a signal to us..."

"Just as I said!" exclaimed the young Faetian happily.

Ave stood with bowed head.

"It's a signal that there is nowhere for us to return to," he said with an effort.

"What's going on here?" came Gor Terr's rolling bass voice.

Ave Mar took a deep breath.

"The disintegration war, which we have all been so afraid of, has evidently taken place on our unhappy Faena. And its civilisation has committed suicide."

"What utter r-rubbish!" yelled Gor Terr. "Leave our civilisation in peace. It gave us all we have here."

"That's not enough for us to carry on living here."

"That's the last thing I'm aiming to do!"

Toni Fae rushed to his friend as he had done that time in the cave...

"They're saying that..." he whimpered like a child, "that life has perished on Faena, that the planet has flared up for a time like a star."

"That's impossible," objected the engineer calmly. "There's been some kind of observation error here. A disintegration war can wipe out a planet's inhabitants, I'm not disputing that. But it can't annihilate a planet as a heavenly body. Mass is mass, it can't

just disappear. And what does 'has flared up for a time' mean?"

Mada looked inquiringly at Ave.

"We must go down to Um Sat," he said. "Back on Faena, he told me about one of the secrets of the disintegration of matter. If a supervolent explosion should take place in the depths of the sea and if the heat level should reach the critical limit, then all the water in the oceans would instantly split into oxygen and hydrogen, and the hydrogen would become helium, in this way releasing so much energy that the planet would flare up like a star during the reaction."

"Damnation!" whispered the engineer.

"Um Sat warned both Dobr Mar and Yar Jupi of this. They wouldn't listen to him."

"If all the oceans blow up at the same time, then the planet shouldn't just flare up," said the engineer. "Under the impact of shock from all directions, it should be broken up into pieces..."

"To be scattered later," confirmed Ave Mar. "And countless cycles later, its fragments, colliding and breaking up, would spread out along Faena's former orbit."

"How can you say all that?" shouted Toni Fae, clenching his fists. "My mother was there, and my little sisters..."

"My mother was there too," replied Ave Mar sadly.

Toni Fae began sobbing. Gor Terr drew him towards himself, patting him on the shoulder.

Ave and Mada exchanged glances and said

more by doing so than could ever have been conveyed in words. Then they held hands.

"So that's why there were no electromagnetic communications," said Toni Fae, still sobbing. "War had started up there."

"And on the Mar stations?" boomed Gor Terr.

"Perhaps on them too," confirmed Ave Mar sadly.

"No, no!" protested Toni Fae, looking in terror at Ave with eyes full of tears. "It can't be possible out there too!"

Ave shrugged his shoulders.

"There are Faetians on them as well."

"Ala Veg is there!" shouted Toni Fae. "She's not one of them!"

"Calm yourself, Toni Fae," said Mada gently. "I think we should still tell Um Sat about the end of Faena."

"Wretched carr-rion-eaters! Why couldn't they value what they had? They've destroyed thousands of millions of lives! How much higher and more humane the local Faetoids are!"

As he shouted this, Gor Terr charged round the cabin in a frenzy.

"Calm down, friend Gor Terr," said Ave. "It's hard for us to bear the horror that's come down on all of us when we've not only lost our dear ones, but..."

"Towns, fields, r-rivers, forests, seas, oceans!" wailed Gor Terr.

"Yes. And oceans," confirmed Ave Mar sadly.

Gor Terr glared at him almost with hatred.

Then he sighed and said very quietly this time:

"Yes, it's easier for you. There are two of you."

"There are five of us," said Mada.

"If the Elder survives the shock."

"He has been readying himself for it too long," replied Mada. "He saw it all coming."

"I was the one who didn't see anything coming. I was dreaming about new space-ships, about wonderful cities on new planets, about incredible machines that I was inventing in my mind."

"It will all have to be done on Terr," said Mada softly.

Gor Terr burst into a roar of forced laughter.

"Forget about civilisation once and for all, forget about technology. Make clubs and stone axes. If you have children, you won't be able to teach them anything that the unhappy Faetians knew. Civilisation means workshops and Faetians toiling in them. Civilisation means writings that preserve the treasures of thought. All that is gone, gone, gone! And it cannot exist here either!"

Gor Terr was shouting in a frenzy. Toni Fae was frightened by this fit of fury, but his attention was distracted by a signal from the electromagnetic apparatus. The indicator lamp was winking on and off. The astronomer rushed to the set.

"At last! Now the nightmare is over! You see, they're worried about us, they want to tell us that it was a supernova, not Faena

at all. How could we have assumed such a thing?"

The Faetians watched Toni Fae, each trying to retain at least a glimmer of hope.

Finally the chesty voice of a Faetess was heard in the cabin. Toni recognised it as Ala Veg's.

"Quest! Quest! Quest! Can you hear me? There has been a dreadful catastrophe! We shall never have a homeland again. Faena*

*Did an exploded planet actually exist in the Solar System?

In 1596, when he was investigating the laws governing the structure of the Solar System, Kepler suspected there might be a planet missing between Mars and Jupiter. At the end of the 18th century, the scientists Titius and Bode gave a series of numbers: 0.4—0.7—1.0—1.6—2.8—5.2... It reflected the distance of the planets from the Sun. The distance of the Earth from the Sun was taken as unit. But there was no fifth planet with an Earth-Sun distance of 2.8. The astronomers searched and began discovering, one after another, the "minor planets" and even smaller bodies, or asteroids, which were moving on a common orbit. They were fragmentary in shape and seemed to have formed during the DISINTEGRATION of a destroyed planet. The German astronomer Hermann Oberth 150 years ago expressed the hypothesis that such a planet had once existed. In our own times, Professor Sergei Orlov, analysing this hypothesis, gave the planet the romantic name of Phaeton. His work was continued by Academicians Alexander Zavaritsky and Leonid Kvasha. Soviet research, notably that of Yekaterina Gusakova, has shown that the residual magnetism of the meteorites could be explained only by their magnetisation as parts of a big mother planet. Felix Zigel (1963) determined its size as approaching that of the Earth. However, neither the advocates nor the opponents of this hypothesis have successfully accounted for the destruction of the planet. If Phaeton blew up like a high-explosive bomb, its fragments would have flown apart in elongated elliptical orbits round the Sun, but they have remained in their old circular orbit... If two cosmic bodies had collided in space, then their fragments would also have flown in elliptical orbits and would not have formed

has blown up for some unaccountable reason, although it was recently intact, in spite of a disintegration war that broke out on it. *Quest! Quest! Quest!* Hostilities between Deimo and Phobo have ceased. If you too have been fighting amongst yourselves, stop the conflict. There aren't any more Culturals and there aren't any more Superiors. There are only three small groups of unhappy Faetians who have lost their homeland. Are you alive? If only you are still alive! Can we live on Terr?"

Ave Mar put out the light in the observation cabin. The starry sky was now clearer than ever, and so was the new star blazing in it, the malignant Star of Hatred.

End of Part Two

a ring on the former orbit of the planet. It is suggested that meteorite swarms form in at least ten places on the ring of asteroids. It is possible that they are created by the collision and disintegration of the former planet's fragments. Meteorites are falling on Earth to this day, but they include so-called tektites which, perhaps, fell on Earth only once as a consequence of a colossal nuclear explosion in space. All the more so that the form, composition and dehydration of the tektites are identical with nuclear slag.

Thus, a supposition about the cause of its destruction has been added to the hypothesis of a Phaeton that existed in the past.

PART THREE

Fragments

*Where be these enemies?—Capulet! Montague!
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate...*

W. Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*

Chapter One

TWILIGHT

The new star shone ominously in *Quest's* porthole.

The Faetians maintained a shocked silence.

Suddenly, Gor Terr jumped to his feet.

"Technology! Damned technology! It's to blame for everything. I, Gor Terr, the last of Faena's engineers, am the first to r-renounce civilisation! To the forests! To the forests! To the caves! Wild Faetians on a wild Terr!" he boomed, foaming at the mouth. "If anyone r-refuses to leave the r-rocket, I'll wring his neck. Let not a single metal part r-remind wretched people that they were once cultured. Beasts are much higher and nobler!"

His friends tried to calm the engineer down, still unwilling to admit to themselves

that his mind had become clouded.

"Please try to understand, Gor Terr," said Ave reassuringly, "that the five Faetians left on Terr can only have one purpose—not just to survive, but to preserve civilisation, to hand down the heritage of reason to future generations..."

"R-really?" roared Gor Terr with a glare at Mada.

Embarrassed, Mada turned away.

"There must be cultured Faetians after us," confirmed Ave Mar, "and our duty is to preserve for them the knowledge we possess."

"High-flown r-rubbish!" bellowed Gor Terr. "I hate those words and I hate all those instruments. Even touching the damned metal drives me frantic."

"Gor Terr will have to pull himself together," said Ave Mar, raising his voice. "He's an engineer, and he'll stay an engineer to the end of his days."

Gor Terr roared with laughter.

"So that your sons can learn how to make r-rockets out of wall partitions? So that they can learn to slaughter animals, and then their own kind?"

"Never shall the Faetians on Terr learn how to kill their own kind!" exclaimed the outraged Ave Mar. "It will be the most terrible thing if we bow down in our grief. No! Only energy, faith in ourselves and resourcefulness will save what is left of the Faetian race."

"For what?" asked Gor Terr gloomily.

"For the triumph of reason!"

"High-flown words again! What d'you want?"

"I want you to think about what kind of building the Faetians are going to use when they're in the forest, what apparatus and parts will have to be taken from here to the new house, and how we can gradually dismantle the rocket: it's the only source of metal on Terr."

"Dismantle?" echoed Toni Fae in fright.

"Yes," confirmed Ave Mar. "We won't need a spaceship any more. The Faetians will use its walls for axes, knives, spear-points and arrows. We have enough metal to last us several generations for that purpose. By that time, Gor Terr's pupils and their descendants will have learned to prospect for ore here and to smelt it. Civilisation must be preserved!"

Mada looked at her husband with rapture. How many times had he presented himself to her in a new aspect, stronger, firmer, as one who knew which course to adopt!

"Filthy despot!" roared Gor Terr. "He wants to make us serve his unborn offspring! I've had enough of blind obedience to a Dictator who aimed for a disintegration war and achieved it! No! I won't tolerate any authority over me! I don't want to obey anybody's orders, least of all those of an offspring of Danjab's R-ruler!"

"Gor Terr, my dear," intervened Mada gently, putting her hand on his massive hairy arm. "Think what you are saying. We have

no dictators here, or rulers, or their children. There are only Faetians, united by common grief and a common fate. Weren't you the one who dreamed of workshops on Terr? You shall have workshops here in which we, your comrades, shall work for you, and then..." She looked into his eyes and added, "I shall raise helpers for you."

Gor Terr scowled, glaring malevolently from under his beetling brows. Mada's maternal tone soothed him a little. But not for long. He soon relapsed into his former fury and, without listening to anyone, began smashing up the spaceship's control levers, bending them, trying to wrench them out of their sockets.

To save the Faetians, the madman himself and keep the ship's equipment intact, Mada ordered Gor Terr to be confined to the airlock which was used for going out into space.

The noisy struggle with the Faetian strong man distracted the Faetians from their common misfortune. The immediate blotted out what was far away. And only after the hatch had been fastened down behind Gor Terr did Ave Mar and Toni Fae, exhausted and shattered, collapsed into the armchairs at the control panel. They stared dismally in front of them, panting for breath.

Mada was busy near the dispensary. She had decided to give Gor Terr an injection and administer a shock that would bring him to his senses.

All attempts to go into the airlock, however, merely provoked further attacks of

frenzy. They could not even serve him his food.

Such was the unhappy way in which the Faetians spent the first days of their permanent exile. Below, in the common cabin, Faena's most distinguished scientist lay dying; above, in the airlock, the last surviving engineer had gone raving mad.

Toni Fae was deeply depressed.

He heard Ala Veg's voice again during a routine session of electromagnetic communication with Deimo. It was remote and sad. She talked about the meaninglessness of existence, about her husband's serious illness, about the total lack of change and how the station chief, as before, hated the round-head couple. She said that she despised life. She was terrified at the thought of the distance that separated her from Toni Fae. Was life worth living? She suggested that Toni Fae and she should both put an end to their own lives during the next communications session.

Toni Fae could not hold out against this and agreed. He stole from Mada's dispensary an ampoule of stupefying gas, a large dose of which could be fatal. After he had inhaled a little of it, he felt blissfully happy, could not stay on his feet, swayed and sang a silly song about a lizard which ate its own tail. He then collapsed and went to sleep. Mada guessed what had happened, found the ampoule hidden on his person and confiscated it. When he came round, he made the discovery that Mada's language could be far from endearing.

Toni Fae succumbed to apathy. Everything around him seemed dismal and wretched. Even the world of nature had changed. There were no more colourful sunsets on Terr. Night gave way to dull daylight. It never stopped drizzling, and a patchy grey pall of mist clung to the tree-tops level with the portholes of the control cabin. There were no golden apples left in the forest.

When twilight descended on Terr, it reminded them of their own gloomy planet.

Misery and homesickness seemed capable of destroying the will to live in all the other Faetians, as had happened with Toni Fae.

Mada, however, in whom nature had stirred a sense of responsibility for all, sick and well alike, could not give in to despair. She had to look after Um Sat, feed everybody, keep an eye on Toni Fae and encourage Ave with an affectionate glance from time to time.

Ave Mar was conducting himself with dignity. He had obligations which none but he could fulfil: it was necessary to go hunting in the forest. Gor Terr couldn't help him now. Ave would go out of the ship, leaving Mada in a state of permanent anxiety, but he always returned before dark, and with his kill. By the will of the circumstances, Ave, a passionate believer in the preservation of the lost Faena's civilisation, was having to lead a very primitive mode of life. He had stopped using firearms, saving the ammunition for more urgent occasions. He had made a bow and he practised archery. Using his natural strength, he could draw a bowstring so that

the arrow with its hand-made head could pierce a stout tree-branch right through.

Once, Ave Mar brought back a big fat bird hit by one of his arrows. Careful not to disturb Um Sat, the astronauts assembled in the control cabin, talking quietly amongst themselves. Mada began inexpertly plucking the hunting trophy, pleased that it would make a good bouillon for the sick man.

Toni Fae was adjusting the electromagnetic communications set, hoping for a session with Ala Veg. Mada warned him that if he made a fool of himself again, she would ban communications with Deimo. Toni sheepishly bowed his head.

Ave Mar was relaxing after his hard day in the rain while hunting in the forest.

Mada looked round at the porthole and screamed. The snarling face of a Faetoid was staring into the cabin. His shoulders and chest were matted with curly hair, his skin showing through underneath. No thought was readable in the crazy eyes.

Only Ave Mar realised that this was Gor Terr lowering himself by rope, not a wild beast that had made its way to them. The madman had evidently torn his clothes into strips and knotted them together to make a rope. He had opened the outer airlock hatch, climbed outside and was now descending the ship's fuselage.

In an attempt to head him off, Ave Mar rushed to the transition hatch, tore through the common cabin and disappeared into the lower airlock. He shinned down the vertical

ladder, hardly touching the rungs on the way.

But however agile Ave Mar may have been, Gor Terr had time on his side.

Ave Mar was only just getting out of the lower airlock when the escapee was already clinging to the end of the home-made rope. No rational Faetian would ever have risked jumping from such a height. But Gor Terr was not being rational. He dropped to the ground in front of Ave Mar, jumped up below him, as if on springs, and made a dash for the forest.

Without realising what he was doing, Gor Terr ran into the forest straight on to the path beaten by the animals on their way to the watering place. It was sodden after the rain and his feet slipped and slithered apart. But he was conscious of only one thing: he was being pursued. He leaped aside into a small glade, unrecognisable after the rain, since it was covered with muddy puddles that disappeared into the mist. Gor Terr never suspected that there was a bog hidden underneath the wet green surface. He dived into a cloud of mist hanging over the grass and disappeared.

Ave Mar, who had been following on his heels, stopped dead. Then he immediately dashed forward. His feet sloshed through the slime. He took several careful, squelching steps and suddenly saw Gor Terr in the mist. He looked as if he was sitting down on the green grass. Only his head and torso were visible above it. It took Ave Mar a moment to

realise that Gor Terr had sunk waist-deep into a quagmire.

Until recently, Ave Mar, used to dwelling in the civilised cities of Faena and to driving a steamcar along magnificent highways, had never suspected that it might be possible to sink up to the waist in the soil like that. Ave had wandered into this bog a few days back when the rain had started pouring down. But his instinctive caution, aroused by the foul, stinking mud that was squelching underfoot, had saved him, making him skirt the deceptive glade with its murky puddles. This time, however, he could not back away; he rushed to Gor Terr's assistance. He immediately sank knee-deep into the quagmire. He made a movement to extricate himself and realised that he was sinking into the mire himself. Fortunately, he was not as heavy as Gor Terr; moreover, he was nearer to the edge of the bog. Avoiding sudden movements, he lay down and began to extricate himself by crawling, as if swimming over a shallow surface covered with wet grass.

Once he felt himself on firmer ground, Ave stood up, glanced over his shoulder and saw Gor Terr. Now only his head was showing above the grass and his outstretched hands, with which he was clutching at some roots. Gor managed to turn his head and look at Ave Mar, his bulging, glazed eyes staring out of the mist. Every movement he made sucked him down still further.

Ave Mar felt his horror physically and stopped in spite of himself, but read such

reproach in the doomed man's eyes that he shuddered. Ave abruptly turned back, crawled out a little way and, although he hardly felt himself on firm ground, jumped to his feet, ran to the nearest tree and tore off a dangling liana.

When he returned to the cloud of mist hanging over the grass, he had some difficulty in making out the shaggy head and the outstretched hands.

At the sight of Ave Mar, Gor Terr's rounded eyes came to life again and shone with entreaty, hope and even joy.

Ave Mar threw the end of the liana to the sinking man. Understanding glimmered in Gor Terr's eyes and he grabbed at the line.

Ave Mar was now faced with the impossible—to drag the gigantic Gor Terr out of the quagmire. Ave Mar had nothing like the strength to do such a thing. But with the liana he had brought a crooked branch which he had broken off a tree. He drove it into a firm mound and began winding the liana onto it as if onto a windlass.

Turn by turn, he gradually pulled Gor Terr out so that the latter finally managed to lie flat and crawl along, as Ave had done before him. At last, a mud-plastered Gor Terr rose to his full height in front of Ave.

"You're not bad as an engineer, Ave Mar," he said. "Thank you."

These words meant more to Ave Mar than any diagnosis. He now realised that the deadly danger to which Gor Terr had been subjected in the bog had administered the

nervous shock needed to save him from insanity. Gor Terr had come back to his senses.

"What happened? How did I end up here? Weren't we out hunting together? Who undressed me? Your wife will take me for a Faetoid."

"She'll be happy! You've been seriously ill."

"R-really?" Gor Terr was astonished. "But I've certainly been having nightmares. I dreamt the Dictator had thrown me into prison."

"That's all over. Don't think about it any more. There are more important things to be done. We can't live in the rocket any longer. We have to deliver food and water to the top. The Elder can't go outside."

"Then we'll have to build a house in the forest."

"I must admit I don't know how to do that. I'm only a theoretician."

"But the theoretician figured out how to rig up a windlass quickly enough. With a helper like you, it would be easy to knock up a house in the forest. I can already see how to set about it."

Mada couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Ave Mar and the recently crazed Gor Terr chatting amiably together on the way back.

"I don't understand this at all," whispered Toni Fae. "Oughtn't we to help Ave Mar tie him up?"

"No, certainly not!" exclaimed Mada.

With the instinct of a Sister of Health, she had grasped that years of training and care couldn't have given as good a result as what had happened in the forest.

...The unfamiliar thudding of axes was heard in the forest.

The enormous, round-shouldered Dzin, wringing out her wet ginger hair with her long hands, crept up to the spot where the mighty stranger, who had put paid to a Spotted Horror and to many of Dzin's fellow tribesmen, was now slaying trees. And yet he wasn't eating them.

Hidden in a thicket, squatting on her haunches and holding her heels with her forepaws, she was watching as he and another, who had hair only on his head, were hitting the trees with strange sticks that had what looked like wet, glittering ends. Their strength was so great that the tree fell down like a slain beast. Then the strangers skinned the trees with their clubs, breaking off all the branches, and the tree became straight and smooth. They shortened the tree with a screaming stick, then dragged it over to the other slain trees and forced them to fit together.

In this way, they helped to raise from the ground a huge tree that was empty inside. It looked like a cave.

Almost as soon as the strangers had finished banging their sticks, Dzin would hide in a thicket so as to come to the summons of the thudding noise on the next day.

Ave Mar and Gor Terr never suspected that their work was being watched. They knocked together a frame thought up by Gor Terr without any metal fixings. The work was nearing its end.

Many instruments and much equipment had to be transferred to the house into which the astronauts had to move.

Gor Terr and Ave Mar went to the ship to fetch all these things. So as not to disturb Um Sat by hammering in the common cabin, they went straight up to the control cabin. Assisted by Ave Mar, Gor Terr began breaking off the levers and rods on which the electromagnetic communications apparatus was secured.

At this point, the always quiet and tactful Toni Fae flew off the handle.

"Gor Terr and Ave Mar can kill me first," he screamed hysterically, "but I won't let anything in the spaceship be damaged."

Gor Terr bellowed with laughter, as during his recent crazy spell.

"D'you want me to pay you off, kid, tie your hands together and dump you in an empty airlock? I feel sorry for you. Just get this into your head: no one needs my *Quest* any more. I shall be the first to break it up. So out of the way, my dear Toni Fae."

"Kill your old friend first!"

Ave Mar turned to Mada in his astonishment.

Her face was troubled and her eyes were sad.

"Get out of the way!" roared Gor Terr.

"Stop," came a feeble voice from the hatch. Overcoming his weakness, Um Sat climbed up into the control cabin. (Gor Terr involuntarily froze in front of Toni Fae, not thrusting him aside after all.) "Stop," repeated Um Sat. "The spaceship *Quest* is inviolable. Everything is changing in the life of the Faetians. They must choose a new way."

Again Ave Mar looked at the alarmed, saddened Mada.

Gor Terr stood still in bewilderment.

Toni Fae rushed to the electromagnetic communications apparatus.

Chapter Two

MUTINY IN SPACE

Ala Veg realised that her husband was going to die. When she made the mutual suicide pact with Toni Fae, she prepared for the forthcoming electromagnetic communications session by stealing from Mrak Luton a pistol loaded with a poisoned bullet.

Tycho Veg was fading away. Completely bald, without even eyebrows and beard, he was lying on the bed in the VEGs' common cabin and was staring intently at his wife as if from somewhere far away. Ala Veg could not stand that anguished stare and fled into the observatory.

She went over to the electromagnetic communications apparatus and looked for a

long time at the bullet with the brown prickles which she had hidden on the control panel among the instruments.

She was afraid that she might not be able to squeeze it in her fist, although somewhere out there, on faraway Terr, young Toni Fae, who loved her, must depart this life at the same time. She was afraid of inflicting this last blow on her dying husband. Ala Veg was torn by contradictory feelings. She could not recover from the knowledge that her children had perished. The starry distance that separated her from them, however, was dulling her despair. And yet the starry distance to Terr, which brought her the young man's voice after a long delay, had not prevented her from turning his head and even persuading him to commit suicide with her. But Tycho Veg was here, close to her, was suffering, and was looking at her out of non-existence with huge sad eyes. Ala Veg wept a great deal and stopped observing the stars altogether. What was the point of all that now?

Engineer Tycho Veg died at dinner-time as quietly as he had lived. His wife remained at his side, unable to do anything to help. His naked head with the shadows of the sunken eyes, the taut skin of the face and the grin of the sagging lower jaw were indeed reminiscent of a skull.

When Ala Veg realised that her husband was no more, she was seized by a fit of rage.

Flinging the door wide open, she burst noisily into the common cabin where the

Lutons and Brat Lua were having their dinner. Lada Lua was waiting on them at table.

Mrak Luton, flabby, pot-bellied and pompous, was presiding at the table.

"I accuse you, Mrak Luton!" screamed Ala Veg from the threshold. "You murdered my husband Tycho Veg! You made him charge a torpedo with a warhead that wasn't even screened against radiation!"

Mrak Luton went purple in the face. His pendulous cheeks bulged, his small eyes darted about frantically.

"Is this mutiny?" he wheezed. "I won't stand for it! Silence! Who incited you, a longhead, to this insubordination?"

"My husband Tycho Veg is dead. Stand up, all of you. Honour his memory and curse his murderer, who is sitting at the head of this table."

Brat Lua and Lada rose to their feet. Nega Luton played for time, pretending that she had difficulty in rising from the table, but she stood up nevertheless. Mrak Luton remained seated, frenziedly rolling his eyes and fingering the pistol which he was holding in his hand under the table.

"There is no insubordination here, deep-thinking Mrak Luton," said Brat Lua in a conciliatory tone of voice. "There is only the grief and despair of a Faetess, and that cannot but be respected. We all share your grief, Ala Veg. Engineer Tycho Veg was a good Faetian and of his own accord he would never have begun sending torpedoes to Station Phobo."

"What? Is this treachery? Have you forgotten that all the power in space belongs to me, the heir of Dictator Yar Judi? Don't forget that the ship *Quest* is also subordinate to me. Only I, in the name of the Blood Council, can command it to return here in order to deliver us all to Terr, where we can enjoy a life of ease."

"You are mistaken, deep-thinking Mrak Luton," objected Brat Lua. "There isn't enough fuel on board the ship to ferry us all to Terr. There isn't enough on the station either. And there is even less fuel on Phobo."

"What happened to all the fuel? You and engineer Tycho Veg were answerable for it with your lives!"

"Deep-thinking Mrak Luton has forgotten that on his orders Engineer Tycho Veg fuelled the two torpedo-ships sent to Phobo. A similar madness was also committed on Station Phobo."

"Madness? Silence! How dare you, as a roundhead, condemn the Dictator's successor? I, a Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard, remain so in space! You are under arrest! I am going to shoot you like a crazed lizard!"

"Wise husband, I implore you," intervened Nega Luton. "Why use a pistol? After the death of our beloved engineer, the roundhead will be the only one left on the station who can handle the machinery. It's his duty to provide us with the facilities."

"You are right, Nega! Thank the gentle lady, roundhead! You will simply get away

with imprisonment in my office. Quick march!"

Brat Lua meekly went ahead of the station chief, who kept prodding him in the back with his pistol.

When both Faetians had left the common cabin, Ala Veg turned to the remaining Faetesses.

"Isn't it enough that Faena has perished? Why must its satellite go the same fatal way? Power, dictatorship, murder?"

"What d'you want, you poor wretch? To rise up against my husband?" demanded Nega Luton angrily.

"You stopped him yourself. If he kills Brat Lua, then we won't have anyone left who can understand the station's machinery, and Lada Lua might well refuse to feed us. Then we'll all perish because of that crazy old man of yours."

"Aren't you trying to talk me into mutiny?" sneered Nega Luton.

"Let it be mutiny, then!" confirmed Ala Veg hysterically. "If mutiny will save us, we'll go that far."

"How can there be any talk of salvation if there aren't any spare ships at the stations?" insisted Nega.

"There's *Quest*. It could fly here."

"Why? To add to our starving mouths? Or because there happens to be a certain young man among the astronauts who has finally taken widow Veg's fancy?"

"Shut up, you viper! Get it into your tiny lizard's brain that Brat Lua planned an

underground settlement on the surface of Mar. In such a shelter, on Mar, the Faetian survivors could go on living."

"That's not living, that's vegetating."

"I've been wanting to say for some time," interposed Lada Lua, "that there aren't enough fruits in the greenhouse. But my husband wanted to grow a great many nutritive greens on the surface of Mar. There would be enough not only for us, but for our children."

"What children do you mean?" asked Nega Luton, stamping her foot. "Have you forgotten, you pug-nosed fattie, about the law forbidding you to have children in space?"

"My husband said the old laws are invalid now. We're going to have a child!"

"Criminals!" hissed Nega Luton. "They want to ruin us! There's food and oxygen for only six here, and no more!"

"Tycho Veg is dead," said Ala Veg sadly. "Even if a tiny Lua is born to follow him, the station will survive. But we have to think about the future. We shall have to go down onto the surface of Mar."

"Well, of course, you'll be given a ship the way a big proprietor gets a steamcar," jeered Nega Luton.

"I'll take the responsibility for that," announced Ala Veg.

"But first we must strip Mrak Luton of his powers."

"What?" Nega Luton nearly choked with fury.

"You must understand yourself, as a one-

time lady of importance, that you won't survive without the Luas, even if your husband starts firing poisoned bullets in all directions. The two of you know nothing about technology or astronavigation. We Faetesses are the ones who have got to decide."

"Decide what?"

"Who's going to be in charge of the station."

"I will not betray my husband."

"Then you will betray yourself."

"But he won't give up his power, not for anything. And he's armed."

"The Faetesses can do anything if they act together."

"I fully support the gentle Ala Veg," declared Lada.

"Make up your mind, Nega Luton. You will be fed and looked after as before only if you take our side."

"But I..." Nega Luton was still vacillating, glaring inimically at the inflexible Ala Veg.

The door was flung wide open and Mrak Luton burst in like a conqueror. He pushed out his huge belly and puffed up his cheeks to hide their flabbiness.

"Mrak Luton!" announced Ala Veg. "You have been removed by us from your post as chief of the station!"

Mrak Luton collapsed into an armchair, his little sunken eyes goggling at Ala Veg.

"What did you say, madwoman?"

"I am speaking for all the Faetesses on the station. You have got to submit to us and go into your office until your fate has been decided. Brat Lua will run the station machi-

nery, since we have to breathe and use up energy. If you kill any of us now, then you will thereby bring about your own destruction."

Nega Luton nodded in agreement.

"What? You too, Nega?" was all that Mrak Luton could manage to say, his eyes riveted on his hook-nosed wife.

"Mrak, I'm concerned solely for the two of us. I have obtained their agreement to take care of us and supply us with everything necessary. We shall be in the position of proprietors."

"I refuse!" roared Mrak Luton, drawing his pistol.

However, he didn't go so far as to use it.

Ala Veg and Lada Lua advanced on him, whereas Nega held back.

Mrak Luton rose reluctantly to his feet and, still brandishing his pistol, began backing away.

In this manner, they all went out into the corridor.

Enraged and distraught, Mrak Luton was backing towards his office door, and the two Faetesses were crowding him. Nega Luton timidly brought up the rear.

"I'll still settle the score with you! I'm giving way out of mercy. I'll release that mangy roundhead purely so that he can do the dirty jobs. But I'm not relinquishing my power! You'll never get me to do that!"

"We'll talk to you, Mrak Luton, tomorrow. But today, just think it all over carefully in your office."

"But I didn't get all my dinner. Let them bring the other courses here."

"We'll postpone your dinner until tomorrow. Thinking works better on an empty stomach. We may also cut down on the oxygen supply to your office. But not immediately, because FOR THE TIME BEING your brain cells must work normally so that you can become reconciled."

"You're not a Faetess, Ala Veg, you're a monster."

"My husband, whom you murdered, wouldn't agree with you, Mrak Luton."

"I have never committed murder. I served the Dictator faithfully and honestly, and I carried out his instructions. I had a secret order from him in the event of a disintegration war. I am in no way to blame. I can show you the inscribed tablet."

"You can do that when we put you on trial. Meanwhile, you are simply relieved of your post."

Ala Veg opened the chief's office and let out the bewildered Brat Lua. With a business-like air, as if nothing had happened, Mrak Luton went inside and sat down at his desk with dignity, pretending that he had urgent matters to deal with.

Ala Veg locked the door from outside and invited Brat Lua into the common cabin.

"We have to elect a new station chief," she announced.

"Why?" protested Nega Luton. "I've helped you to release Brat Lua. I hope he will support me. I have risked losing my family

happiness. You Faetesses ought to appreciate this."

"Your husband is the criminal who murdered my husband to violate the Agreement on Peace in Outer Space and unleash a disintegration war between the space stations of Mar."

"They sent torpedoes against us from Phobo too," said Mrak Luton's wife, in self-justification on her husband's behalf.

"We could have defended ourselves without attacking. And then Tycho Veg would still have been alive."

"You have been blinded by your grief, Ala Veg. I understand you with the heart of a Faetess. But can we talk about one death, when thousands of millions of Faetians have perished? Remember, we need Mrak Luton as chief of the station. We've got to survive. Smel Ven, as commander of the ship, will obey only his orders to fly to us."

"Have you forgotten Toni Fae's message that Smel Ven had been killed? Besides, Um Sat was in charge of the expedition, not Smel Ven."

"The destruction of Faena has deprived me of memory and reason. What are you counting on, Ala Veg?"

"On Terr's Faetians. They won't abandon us. But first, Mrak Luton must be removed."

Brat Lua was listening to the women in dismay.

"Then let the gentle Ala Veg be chief of the station," proposed Lada Lua.

"On no account!" screamed Nega Luton.

"Calm yourself, once distinguished lady. I am not making any such claim. The chief of the station must be the one who shows the Faetians the way to a future existence."

"Who can do that except my husband?"

"The insignificant Mrak Luton is only capable of threats. He can't even bring himself to shoot anyone now because he's afraid for his fat belly. He's just a stinker, and certainly not the leader of the future Marians."

"Marians?"

"Yes, Marians, that is, the Faetians who will live on Mar in the underground cities planned by Brat Lua."

"Aren't you trying to say that the station chief should be a roundhead?" said Nega Luton, outraged.

"What good fortune that the Lutons can't leave any descendants on Mar," said Ala Veg with unconcealed contempt.

"You aren't thinking of leaving any descendants, are you, Ala Veg? And with whose help?"

"Shut up, you viper! I've lost three children and a husband; all you've lost is your conscience."

"I refuse to agree that Mrak Luton should have his post taken over by someone else."

"Then off you go, join your husband and think the matter over with him."

"I haven't finished my dinner."

"You can finish dining at table with him ... tomorrow. If you have both changed your minds."

"That is force!.."

"Brat Lua," said Ala Veg, turning to the released Faetian. "We elect you chief of the station. We will now get in touch with the people on Phobo and find out how they have been faring. We shall all beseech *Quest* to come and fetch us."

"*Quest* can only set us down on the surface of Mar," said Brat Lua. "I will shoulder all the worry and responsibility. The Faetian race and its civilisation must be preserved. I've long had projects for installations that, given the efforts of all surviving Faetians, can be brought to fulfilment."

The little Faetian stood solemnly before the Faetesses as he undertook this new mission.

After a moment's thought, he added:

"However, everything will depend on whether the Faetians of *Quest* agree to abandon the bountiful and flourishing Terr and undergo fresh hardships and perils to rescue us."

"I shall implore them!" cried Ala Veg.

"No one will risk losing happiness," said Nega Luton. "There's no sense in Brat Lua being chief. No one will fly to the station, no one will ferry us to the surface of Mar."

"Not everybody there is as soft-hearted as the gentle Sister of Health," said Lada Lua.

Nega Luton bristled with indignation. How dare this insignificant roundhead talk about her like that? But she pulled herself up at once. Lada was now the wife of the new

station chief, so Nega Luton controlled herself.

"It's just that I'm worried about us all," she muttered through her teeth in self-justification.

"It's nearly time for the electromagnetic communications session," announced Ala Veg.

She left the common cabin and made for the observatory.

When she sat down at the control panel, she saw in front of her the silvery bullet with the sharp brown prickles. She picked it up gingerly by the blunt end and threw it into the rubbish chute through which it would end up in space.

The signal lamp lit up, indicating a call.

"Poor Toni Fae! He thinks he's called Deimo for the last time," said Ala Veg aloud, although there was no one near her.

Brat Lua walked into the observatory and announced:

"Mrak Luton has just informed us over the intercom that he has agreed to relinquish his post as station chief in return for the dinner he didn't have time to finish."

"Even his own greedy stomach's against him," replied Ala Veg.

"As the new chief, I shall have to take part in the session with the Faetians of *Quest on Terr.*"

"Allow me to open the session, Brat Lua. I'll try to put it as convincingly as possible."

"The first word is yours," agreed the new chief.

The signal lamp began winking on the control panel.

Ala Veg switched the apparatus on.

Chapter Three

IN THE NAME OF REASON

Stooping and breathing heavily, Um Sat lowered himself into the armchair before the control panel. His wrinkled face with its bushy white beard had sagged noticeably, his eyes were deeply sunken, but watched with their former close and sad attention. He asked Toni Fae, for the benefit of those who had come back from the forest, to re-run the recording of the last communications session. Ala Veg's chesty voice was heard in the cabin once again.

"Quest! Quest! Quest! Faetians of Terr! Your brothers and sisters, abandoned on an artificial speck of dust amid the stars, are crying out to you for help. Around us is the cold and infinite emptiness of space. We have no solid ground under our feet, we are feeding on the produce of the greenhouse, which is being destroyed by endless showers of particles discharged by the explosion of Faena. We shall not survive here unless you come to our rescue. Quest! Quest! Quest! Faetians of Quest! Remember that you are of the same flesh and blood as those who gave life to you and to us! Fly to us in your ship, which we consider ours also. Fly to us

in the name of the love which shall forever be the beginning of the future and everlasting life. The Faetians must not perish! Help us in the name of Reason, whose heritage we must preserve. *Quest! Quest! Quest!*"

Ala Veg's voice fell silent.

The Faetians exchanged glances. Um Sat glanced inquiringly at Ave Mar and Gor Terr.

Gor Terr went up to Toni Fae and rested his enormous hand on the other man's shoulder.

"My friend Toni Fae," he said, as if his decision was the only one that mattered. "The appeal by our brothers and sisters from Deimo will r-remain bitter and unanswered, and it will break our hearts. I think we ought not to maintain electromagnetic communications with space any more."

"What?" cried Mada, outraged. "Turn our backs on our own people when they're in trouble?"

"We can't help them," Gor Terr tried to say as gently as possible. "If we flew to the station, we would just be parasites, using up all their food and oxygen."

"But they're hoping *Quest* will put them down on the surface of Mar," protested Toni Fae.

"Alas!" continued Gor Terr gloomily. "That's as impossible as our r-resettlement on Deimo. We could fly as far as the space station, but the ship hasn't got enough fuel for a braked landing on Mar."

With a column of figures written on a plas-

tic tablet, Gor Terr convincingly demonstrated the impossibility of flying to the Faetians on Station Deimo.

Ave Mar, Toni Fae and Mada understood everything perfectly. Only Um Sat, apparently, could not wait until the engineer had finished. He took a turn for the worse and had to be put to bed in the control cabin this time. Mada fussed about him, trying to bring him round.

Water was needed. There wasn't any, since the reserve supply had been used up. More would have to be fetched up from below.

When he had brought some water, Gor Terr began insisting that they should all move into the house, which was now ready.

"The forest air is more likely to cure the Elder," he affirmed.

It was decided that Toni should stay behind at the communications apparatus. At the next session, he could inform the Faetians on Deimo that they could not possibly be reached on *Quest*.

Toni Fae was brooding silently. Mada feared for him. She carefully locked up the dispensary so that he wouldn't be able to get his hands on an ampoule of stupefying gas and she made Ave Mar collect up all the poisoned bullets.

Sadly, as if saying goodbye to their ship forever, the astronauts climbed down the vertical ladder leading out of the lower airlock.

Um Sat, whom they wanted to carry,

refused to be helped and actually went down the ladder himself with Mada supporting him.

The path that the Faetians took as they carried the various gear from the ship turned slippery. Gor Terr nearly fell down.

"Don't stray off the tr-rack," he warned anxiously.

The building with its sloping roof appeared among the trees.

In his time, Ave Mar, accustomed to the round buildings of Danjab, would have thought the house ugly, but the change from a round rocket to a rectangular structure now seemed right. He even sighed with relief; they had a refuge for long cycles of their forthcoming life.

Suddenly, a tawny shadow darted across the window.

Ave Mar gripped Gor Terr by the arm. He too had noticed something suspicious and he headed determinedly for the house. The door had not yet been made.

On the threshold, Gor Terr collided with an enormous Faetoid with bared fangs. He charged at it, unaware that this was Dzin showing her teeth in the semblance of a smile. He grabbed the uninvited guest by the paw and nimbly threw her over his shoulder so that she landed on some tree-stumps nearby. She jumped up and fled howling into the forest.

In this way, an "attack" by Faetoids on the house was beaten off.

The Faetians went through the doorway.

Gor Terr screwed up his nose in distaste. There was an animal stench inside.

Mada opened the windows to air the place.

"Home at last," she said with relief.

"I'm afraid," said Um Sat, "that for a long time the Faetians will have to prove that this is their home."

"Just let those filthy beasts try to barge in again!" roared Gor Terr.

"I was afraid you were going to kill our uninvited guest," confessed Ave Mar.

"I would have done so, if I hadn't thought it was Dzin. We owe her so much."

"Dzin?" asked Mada, on the alert. "Really?"

"Settle yourselves in," suggested Gor Terr. "I'll go to meet Toni Fae, otherwise he might be met by someone else."

Mada smiled as he left. Such friendship between Faetians was a joy to her.

Ave began fashioning a door, skilfully wielding a home-made axe. The Faetoids might attack the sleeping Faetians in the night. As he barred the windows and the door, he wondered what the future held in store for them all: it would be bleak enough if they had to live in a permanent state of siege.

When the windows had been barred with stakes, the atmosphere in the house had a depressing effect on Mada. As she watched the imperturbable Ave, however, she too was filled with confidence.

Twilight was deepening. Mada felt uneasy as she thought about Toni Fae and Gor Terr. The fate of the faraway Faetians on Deimo

also gave her no peace of mind. How she wished that all the survivors could be together!

Mada peered out of the window through the stakes. It was totally dark in the forest. Tired after his walk, Um Sat was sound asleep. Mada had given him a whiff of stupefying gas from an ampoule.

Ave was admiring his newly-made door, rough-hewn, but solid. He locked it for the first time.

Mada looked at it regretfully.

"Ave, wasn't it you who said that the Faetians must preserve the civilisation of their ancestors?"

"Of course, and I shall go on saying it."

"Then how is it that we, as carriers of civilisation, could abandon in space the Faetians who are so close to us? Is there no way of bringing them to join us? If we could only find fuel here!.."

Ave Mar heaved a sad sigh.

"Even the fuel we found here wouldn't help. We wouldn't be able to process it the way they used to in Faena's fuel workshops. Where are we to get all the pipes and distilling spheres?"

"Surely Engineer Gor Terr will think of something?"

"Hardly..."

"Couldn't we fly to Deimo and all work together to extend the greenhouse, improve the machinery and still live together? I'm afraid of staying here on a hostile planet. It's not at all what it seemed on that first

day. D'you remember the watering place, with the baby reindeer and the beast of prey drinking together in peace? But now?"

The door opened with a creak. Mada jumped up and seized Ave by the arm. Gor Terr was standing in the doorway. He moved aside to admit a distraught and dejected Toni Fae.

Mada rushed over to him, clasped him to her breast and began sobbing.

"Was there a session?" asked Ave Mar. Trying to control himself, Toni Fae replied:

"It would have been better to die than hear the answer that Ala Veg came out with when she heard our refusal."

"R-refusal? It's an impossibility!" interrupted Gor Terr.

"She was sobbing. Sobs have never been broadcast over the air before. It was too much. Only why did Mada take the yellow ampoule from me?.."

"Calm yourself, my dear Toni Fae. I'll give you a whiff from that ampoule in a moment. Look how well Um Sat is sleeping."

"But how can I sleep in peace if out there, on Deimo, Ala Veg has given up all hope and has lost faith in the power of love? I would fly to her without a second thought."

Ave and Mada exchanged glances.

Mada gently calmed Toni Fae down. Sitting by the window stakes, Gor Terr was plunged in gloom. The damp came wafting in from the forest. It had started raining again. The

Faetians couldn't possibly have imagined so much water coming down from the sky. There had never been anything like it on Faena.

Toni dozed off, but tossed and turned, moaning in his sleep.

Ave Mar squatted down at the rough-hewn table, took a split branch and began making marks on it.

Gor Terr, his shoulders hunched, was still sitting by the window. He looked like a huge boulder. He was asleep.

Exhausted by all she had been through during the day, Mada settled down on some bedding not far from Um Sat and Toni Fae, who were sleeping side by side.

Ave Mar was doing his best to save the batteries for the portable lamp. He switched it off and lit a taper which he had improvised out of a resinous splinter similar to the one he had split to make a tablet.

The rain finally stopped in the morning, the wind dispersed the clouds and Sol peeped into the Faetians' new house. A mother-of-pearl footpath showed through the trees, the water on it shimmering.

Mada, barely awake and already busy with the household chores, instantly noticed a change in Ave.

Gor Terr was in a bad mood.

Mada offered everyone some plain food, economising in the stores brought from the ship.

"If only you'd heard her voice," said Toni Fae to no one in particular.

Gor Terr exploded.

"They're selfish! All they think about is themselves. Who gave them the r-right to demand such a sacrifice of us as the r-refusal to live on a bountiful planet? And they're the ones who tried to blow up a space station like their own! If I was deciding whether we should fly to them or not, I wouldn't allow it!"

Mada was frightened to detect a familiar ring in his booming bass voice.

Toni Fae looked dismally at his friend.

"They're not all in the wrong. We've got to distinguish between the station chief, the Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard, and Ala Veg and the roundhead Luas, neither of whom is in the least to blame."

"And there are some Faetians on Phobo who aren't in the least to blame either," interposed Mada.

"No matter how many of them there may be, how can we possibly help them?" snapped Gor Terr.

"It's not quite like that," intervened Ave suddenly.

All turned to look at him. Even Um Sat, lying on a bench near the table, tried to raise himself on one elbow.

"I did some calculations during the night. Gor Terr, as an engineer, could verify them."

"A specialist on elementary particles has been checking the engineer who designed the spaceship *Quest*?" inquired Gor Terr darkly.

"Excuse me, Gor Terr, but I've been

going through your calculations and I found them correct."

"Well, well!.. I'm so glad," said Gor Terr, heaving a sigh of relief.

"What a pity!" responded Toni Fae.

"Even so, Gor Terr's calculations can be taken further."

"R-really?" Gor Terr looked sharply round at Ave Mar.

"His calculations were based on the assumption that all the Faetians of *Quest* must fly to Deimo."

"But of course! How can we possibly split up?" exclaimed Mada.

"Only by doing that could we save the civilisation of Faena."

"Let Ave clarify his idea," requested Um Sat.

"To economise in fuel for *Quest*, only two of us must go up in her, not five. Then the remainder of the fuel plus the reserves of fuel on Deimo and Phobo will enable us to deliver the Faetians on the space stations to Mar. *Quest*, of course, will not be able to return to Terr."

"Which means," shouted Toni Fae, "that only one Faetian can go with the pilot Gor Terr!"

"Ave Mar can also fly the ship," commented Gor Terr. "After all, he's been fighting so hard for the preservation of Faena's culture."

Mada looked at her husband in alarm.

"I haven't had the time to discuss it with Mada, but she can express her opinion now.

In the name of Reason, I am prepared to stay on Terr if Mada stays with me. True, after *Quest* has gone, we'll be living like savages who will from then on have to make axes and arrowheads out of stone."

"I am prepared to stay with my Ave," said Mada, "as I would be prepared to fly with him to Deimo."

"Then I can fly with Gor Terr!" whispered Toni Fae with unconcealed joy.

"No," objected Ave firmly. "If a great sacrifice has to be made in the name of Reason, then the continued Faetian civilisation on Mar can only be headed by Faena's Great Elder, Um Sat, its first man of learning."

Toni Fae buried his head in his hands.

Um Sat looked at him with compassion and said:

"I am old and ill. Is it worth counting on me when you speak of a new civilisation on Mar?"

"Surely it is not for a Great Elder to live like a savage in the primeval forest?" objected Ave. "That is the lot of the younger ones."

"I agree to anything," said Toni Fae in a dead voice.

"I swear it's not going to be like that!" Gor Terr suddenly banged his fist on the table. "Um Sat will, of course, fly on *Quest* to head the civilisation of the Marians. They'll have to apply the technology of the space stations. Without technology, the Marians won't survive. However, it is not Engineer Gor Terr who will fly to Mar with the great scientist, but his fr-riend Toni Fae."

"But I can't fly spaceships!" exclaimed the agitated Toni Fae.

Mada looked admiringly at Gor Terr.

"I'm r-right, am I not?" continued Gor Terr. "Those who stay behind on Terr won't have it any easier than the ones flying to Mar. They'll have to fight for every step they take in this confounded forest. Toni Fae would find it hard protecting the family of Ave and Mada here."

"But I can't fly spaceships," repeated Toni Fae sadly.

"You'll learn. Let the first university also start work in this first house, knocked together on Terr. It will have only one student, but three professors: the gr-reat scientist Um Sat, his celebrated pupil Ave Mar and the modest engineer, Gor Terr."

"Two professors will eventually become savages," said Ave Mar with a smile. "Gor Terr has just shown us what true friendship is. I will undertake to help Toni Fae in every way so that he can fly to Deimo with Um Sat."

The Elder rose from his bench.

"However hard the history of future generations of Terrans and Marians may be, it is a good thing that it begins with such noble sentiments!"

Tears were trickling down the old man's wrinkled face.

There was never a more terrible day than the one when *Quest* had to lift off from Terr for space.

Left behind on Terr, Ave Mar, Mada and Gor Terr tried not to show what it cost them to see the others off.

The giant rocket loomed above the forest like a pointed tower. The last farewells were imminent.

The Elder embraced in turn each of the two sturdy, strong Faetians who were staying behind on the alien planet. Would they be able to survive?

Then Mada came up to him. Resting her head on his white beard, she raised her head and said something. The Elder drew her close to him and kissed her hair.

"Does Ave Mar know about it yet?"

"No, not yet," replied Mada.

"May Reason remain to live on in your descendants!"

Ave Mar, who had just come up, understood everything without having to be told. He hugged his wife in gratitude.

When Um Sat followed by Toni Fae, climbed with difficulty up the vertical ladder, he looked round and called:

"At least teach them how to write!"

Gor Terr understood and smiled bitterly.

"They'll have to learn hunting, not writing. And how to make stone axes!"

The Elder disappeared through the hatch.

As the engines fired, the three Faetians moved away from the rocket and raised their hands in a last farewell. They were seeing off forever those who, in the name of Reason, were taking away with them the heritage of Faetian civilisation.

Clouds of black smoke burst out from under the rocket.

In the dense forest, the trees were dotted with shaggy Faetoids. With malignant curiosity, they watched their two-legged victims, who were to be eaten in the gully.

The strongest of the Faetoids would seize the hairless ones and not let them return to their "cave without rocks".

Suddenly, under the smooth stone tree into which two of the hairless ones had disappeared, such a terrible thunder roared that even the fiercest of the Faetoids fell from their branches. Then, from under the smooth stone tree, black clouds billowed forth, as before the water falling from above, and flames gushed forth.

The beasts fled helter-skelter in all directions.

The path to the house of the depleted Faetians on Terr had been cleared.

This time they were able to return to their refuge, not suspecting that, in dispersing their enemies, their departed friends had rendered them their last service.

Chapter Four

SPIDERS IN A JAR

After picking up all the Faetians from Station Deimo, *Quest* was approaching Phobo. An increasingly brilliant star was already conspicuous in the porthole.

Vydum Polar, Phobo's engineer, had become the new station chief.

When the disintegration war began on Faena and when Phobo and Deimo each sent out two torpedoes, the young Faetians on Phobo, insisting on a peaceful visit by spaceship to Deimo and outraged by the station chief's conduct, had replaced Dovol Sirius even before the destruction of Faena and before communicating with Deimo about the changes on Phobo.

Dovol Sirius had not resisted. He had even willingly surrendered his powers to Vydum Polar, believing that at last he was going to get some peace of mind and all his worries would be shouldered by the inventor. He was, however, cruelly mistaken.

Quest flew to Phobo with all Deimo's Faetians and with Um Sat and Toni Fae from Terr.

Vydum Polar and Ala Veg had to sit with Um Sat in order to pass judgement on the war criminals. Um Sat named them as the Lutons and Dovol Sirius.

The concave cabin walls were hung with landscapes of Faena—forests, meadows, rivers, towns and seas that did not exist any more.

Terrified and outraged, totally unprepared for such a state of affairs, the accused sat before the judges on a black bench and behind, against the silvery walls, stood all the Faetians left in space.

The space station always turned on its axis. The gigantic sphere of Mar kept appearing in the portholes and floating away again

with inexorable regularity. The baleful, reddish-brown colours of the planet during the strange, swift-passing night alternated in the cabin with the daytime glow of Sol.

Um Sat proved to be a Faetian with a will of iron. He had been seriously ill on Terr and had only fully recovered on the journey. Now, enormously tall, white-haired and white-bearded, he had vigorously taken charge of the Faetian colony. The first thing he had done was to put the war criminals of space on trial. He now sat calmly at the table, rhythmically tapping it with his finger.

The interrogation began. Vlasta Sirius, smirking nastily, put up an evasive and spirited resistance.

"The self-appointed court has no right to try us. There are no laws in space and you cannot pass sentence."

"The law is the will of the Faetians here," replied Um Sat firmly. His knitted brows boded ill for the accused. He glanced significantly at the landscapes in their frames, which were now black in token of mourning.

The old scientist inspired Vyдум Polar with great respect. He did not look like the other men of learning who had refused to recognise him. On the contrary, Um Sat was interested in Vyдум's inventions and immediately invited him to implement Brat Lua's project.

In spite of her assumed arrogance, Vlasta Sirius had the shivers. She looked pathetic, although her tone of voice was defiant.

"Then look for war criminals among the chiefs of the space stations, not among the serving girls."

These words aroused general laughter among the Faetians, who knew the real part played by Phobo's greenhouse nursery-woman.

General Dovol Sirus, gasping at the insult to his wife, was forced to confirm that the decision to send torpedoes to Deimo had been suggested by Vlasta. When he was being questioned, he would hastily jump to his feet, though with an effort. He was now very annoyed, emphasising this in every possible way.

"I can only be condemned for weakness of character in my family life and not for my military actions. I am only a Faetian businessman. My general's rank was conferred on me for the trade-mark of the munitions workshops. As a Faetian businessman, I was intending to acquire territory on Mar so as to sell plots of land at a profit to the Faetian settlers." And he smiled trustingly.

"Whom did you force to prime the disintegration torpedoes?" asked Ala Veg bluntly.

"I primed them myself."

"Was it safe?" asked Ala Veg, pursuing her inquiry further.

"Absolutely. The warheads were well screened to prevent radiation."

"So at no risk to yourself, you took measures to destroy Deimo?" Ala Veg was remorselessly driving the accused into a corner.

"I had to come to terms with fear. I mean

above all my fear of my wife, Vlasta Sirius," replied Dovol Sirius, wiping the perspiration from his bald patch.

"I was right not to trust the Faetians on Deimo," interposed Vlasta Sirius. "They were the first to try and destroy our Phobo."

"But wasn't Vlasta Sirius plotting the same move against Deimo?" asked Vyдум Polar, coming forward.

Vlasta Sirius glared from under close-knit black eyebrows with contempt at her failure of a son-in-law who had dared to condemn her.

"War isn't a picnic," she said defiantly.

"Did the accused really not know of the Agreement on Peace in Outer Space?" Um Sat reminded her, calmly pouring himself some water and motioning to Dovol Sirius that he could sit down.

"How could that be known to a simple nurserywoman who was serving in space for the benefit of the Faetians?" said Vlasta, lowering her eyes.

At this point, even her meek spouse jumped up again and shouted:

"All of us here knew about it!"

"Then why did you lay in torpedoes for the station?" inquired Ala Veg nastily, looking the former chief of Phobo straight in the eye.

"The Faetians on Deimo couldn't be trusted." And Dovol Sirius smiled disarmingly at her again.

"And what has the former chief of Deimo, Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard Mrak

Luton, to say about his misbehaviour?" asked Um Sat.

Mrak Luton rose heavily to his feet.

"I, at least, don't vegetate under someone's heel. I am a soldier. I was carrying out the orders given to me. Here is an order from Dictator Yar Judi. I was under obligation to carry it out in the event of a disintegration war. I cannot be condemned for my integrity as a soldier. The one to blame is certainly not me, his officer, but Yar Judi himself, who violated an order he had signed in person." Mrak Luton laid the written tablets down on the table.

"Mrak Luton, did you know that the war-head was not screened and that it was lethally dangerous to be anywhere near it; yet you still drove my husband Tycho Veg to certain death?"

Mrak Luton grinned and shrugged his fat shoulders.

"An officer sent his soldier ahead in battle. There was a war on."

"The reference to war is irrelevant," observed Um Sat. "It shouldn't happen on a planet, much less in space, for war is an unjustifiable crime."

"Even if it is defensive?" asked Mrak Luton challengingly.

"A disintegration weapon is an attack weapon. It can never be defensive."

"The inventor of the disintegration weapon, of course, has a clearer idea of what to call it," commented Vlasta Sirius maliciously. "Perhaps it would be more correct to con-

demn the one who created this weapon, not the ones who were forced to use it! But *he* is passing judgement!" And she sighed heavily with affected bitterness.

"Very well, then! Condemn me, Um Sat, scientist of matter, because I made my discovery public on two continents simultaneously, hoping that the fear of exterminating all living things would prevent the insanity of wars; condemn me because I did not ban dangerous knowledge as I would do now. But those who, after surviving in space, used that knowledge to harm others—they should answer for their crimes."

The Elder had remained true to himself. As before, he had not been learned in the profundities of the soul; he still thought that it was enough to punish the guilty and ban dangerous knowledge for all time so that evil would be averted. But he was the oldest of the survivors, no one could doubt his integrity, and so he was putting on trial those guilty of a disintegration war in space. An unfamiliar harshness rang in his voice and his eyes burned darkly.

Vlasta Sirius cringed at his words as if she were being whipped.

It was hard to tell from the faces of the judges what was in store for the accused.

Unlike Vlasta Sirius, Nega Luton was completely crushed at being judged by Ala Veg, of all people!..

Lada Lua came up to the judges' table. She was embarrassed and didn't know what to do with her red hands.

"The gentle lady Nega Luton is in no way to blame. When the station chief had to be removed, she sided with us Faetesses on Deimo."

"Will Ala Veg confirm that?" asked Vyдум Polar.

"I confirm it," said Ala Veg to her rival's great astonishment. "Mrak Luton went mad with fury when his wife refused to obey him. She is only to blame for wanting to become first lady of the station."

Nega Luton flushed. Better she had been condemned than made to hear such words. She could have incinerated her judges with a single glance.

Ala Veg sat with lowered eyes, and Toni Fae, standing behind all the Faetians, watched her admiringly. How beautiful she was, and how fair-minded!

The great Elder read out the court's sentence.

Dovol Sirus, Vlasta Sirus and Mrak Luton were guilty of launching disintegration torpedoes with the intention of destroying space stations and were sentenced to imprisonment on Station Phobo. They would not be taken to Mar. They would provide their own services for the rest of their days: they would be left the necessary machinery and the greenhouse.

Nega Luton was acquitted and would be taken to Mar.

Mrak Luton stamped his foot when he heard the sentence.

"This is violence! This is lawlessness! This is a crime!" He began foaming at the mouth. He clutched at his heart and collapsed into his chair.

Dovol Sirius watched him in fright. "I implore you," he whined, "don't leave a maniac with us. Send him back to Deimo... He is a Supreme Officer of the Blood Guard, after all. His hands are steeped in blood."

"Certain Faetians claim to be fair-minded, but they want to destroy us without mercy!" shrieked Vlasta Sirius. "So let *them* fly away! We're banishing them from our station! We're sending them into exile on barren deserts! Exile! Exile! Exile!"

The Faetians gradually dispersed, trying not to look at the condemned.

Nega Luton went up to the judges.

"Thank you for acquitting me. But please leave me with the condemned."

Vydum Polar eyed Nega Luton closely and with distaste. He didn't believe that she wanted to stay behind with that flabby, corpulent Faetian who was choking with rage. This was more likely a matter of calculated self-interest: there would be less work to do on the station than on inhospitable Mar, where they would be compelled to build underground refuges for the Faetians and their descendants.

Vydum Polar was right, but he still hadn't reckoned with Nega Luton's obsessive hatred for Ala Veg at the time.

It took a considerable time to complete Brat Lua's project, augmented, as it was, with many of Vyдум Polar's own technical ideas.

It was possible to build an underground settlement with an artificial atmosphere, constantly purified and enriched with oxygen.

Quest was preparing for its last trip.

Station Phobo would forever be an artificial satellite of the planet Mar.

Since only nine instead of thirteen Fae-tians were landing on the planet, this meant that they could take with them considerably more cargo, technical appliances, instruments and inscribed tablets for study by future Marians.

Vyдум Polar envisaged an acute shortage of the metal necessary to build underground shelters with an artificial air supply, and so he suggested dropping part of Station Phobo onto the planet's surface. This would entail dismantling a third of the station's structure and fitting it with one of the remaining defence rockets.

Station Phobo was much bigger than Station Deimo. A reduction in its accommodation space would not affect the future life of the condemned.

Needless to say, they themselves refused point-blank to take part in this operation, leaving it to the future Marians.

Some of the metal pipes used as corridors and the premises of the disused laboratories were detached from the station. Braked by the reactive force of the defence rocket,

they were to leave the station's orbit and, reducing speed relative to the Marian orbital velocity, were to begin their descent onto the planet. Because of its thinness and low oxygen content, Mar's atmosphere should add to the braking effect on the falling metal without causing re-entry burn-up.

The whole of Vydum Polar's operation took a considerable time, during which all the Faetians lived together. The condemned, however, kept apart from the rest and their attitude to them was hostile.

The leave-taking of the Marians and the condemned was consequently not a particularly sad occasion. On the contrary, both sides had a feeling of relief.

Um Sat and Toni Fae were the first to cross over into *Quest*. Both were thinking about Ave, Mada and Gor Terr who had self-sacrificingly given up their places on the ship to the Faetians from the space stations. How were the other three finding it on Terr? Would they hold out in the battle with the Faetoids?

Then all the other Faetians who were leaving went into the ship through the airlock of the station's central section.

Ala Veg went up to Toni Fae.

"We're going to a new world together," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

The young Faetian nearly choked with emotion. Incredible trials and tribulations lay ahead of them, but he was happy.

Toni Fae had to determine the exact landing place for the reserve metal to be used by

future generations of Marians.

Um Sat ordered that *Quest* should land as near as possible to the metal dropped onto Mar. Initially, they would have to dig the first deep shelter themselves. Afterwards, perhaps, they would be able to find natural caves into which future generations would move.

Remembering the lessons taught to him by his friends on Terr, Toni Fae began the gradual undocking of the ship from the central section of Station Phobo.

"Will some other spaceship ever come close to this station?" he wondered. "And when will it be?"

None of those remaining behind was in the central section.

Nega Luton and Vlasta Sirius locked themselves in their cabins.

Mrak Luton, his arms thrust behind his back, was pacing up and down the ring corridor onto which the lifts opened. He was considering how to seize power on Station Phobo. It was Vlasta Sirius whom he regarded as his main opponent, not the bloated Dovol Sirius.

He mentally assigned them all to the various sections leaving the sole leadership to himself. They had many, many cycles to live yet!

The Faetians may not have known about the behaviour of spiders in a jar and how they devour one another. Consequently, the court in space, when leaving the condemned

on Phobo, was not influenced by this example. However...

Dovol Sirius became the chronicler on Phobo. He solemnly wrote memoirs which, in his view, would tell the truth about the tragedy of Faena and its space colonies.

A long, long time afterwards, they did indeed, in certain respects, help to establish the fate of the condemned.

Chapter Five

THE NAKED LEADER

When the wail of a newborn child was heard in the Faetians' house, Dzin was in the forest nearby. She crept up to the window, squatted down and, gripping her heels with her forepaws, began listening. Sensing that the hunters were returning, she leapt for cover into the undergrowth and from there she looked round at the stake-barred window.

The first native Terran had appeared in the Faetians' house. He had to be called by his father's abbreviated surname—Av, or simply Avik.

Mada doted upon her first baby. Often, with his arm round her shoulders, Ave would look for a long time at the tiny, helpless creature.

"The first boy on Terr!" boomed Gor Terr happily. "It's a good thing that a boy was born first. Let him grow up fast so that I can teach him many tricks of the trade

that a r-real Faetian ought to know."

Gor Terr was a wonderful comrade. Modest, tactful, quiet in spite of his reverberating bass voice, he looked after Ave and Mada in the most touching way.

"The future of civilisation is in you," he would say.

After *Quest's* thunderous lift-off, the Faetoids were evidently afraid of the Faetians for some time and did not come near them. But they gradually forgot their fear. The beasts became bolder; Ave and Gor noticed them several times while hunting in the forest. They even stole the trophies occasionally.

As a precaution, the Faetians decided to keep together wherever they went.

The Faetoids took advantage of this.

Once, at dusk, when Mada, left on her own in the house, went to the lake for water, three or four shaggy beasts rushed up to the barred windows and began smashing the stakes.

On hearing the baby cry out, Mada took alarm and ran back, spilling water from the home-made vessel before finally throwing it aside.

The door of the house was locked, but she could not hear Avik crying inside. She threw the door open and froze with horror.

Stakes broken out of the window were lying on the floor. The child was gone. There was a foul reek of animals. Mada recognised it at once.

Snatching something from the shelf and not closing the door behind her, Mada rushed into a thicket where she had glimpsed a tawny red shadow.

Mada was not conscious of her actions. She was impelled purely by her maternal instinct, which replaced courage, strength and even cool calculation.

Her sixth sense told her that the animal that had kidnapped Avik was heading for the caves so as to tear him to pieces...

There is no knowing how she guessed which way the beast would run; she even guessed that the creature was afraid of crossing water. She twice forded a loop in the stream and reached the gully ahead of the kidnappers.

Dzin sprang down from the tree, clutching the howling infant to her hairy breast.

Mada had already heard her child crying in the distance. She ran towards the creature. The powerful beast automatically turned back, but Mada overtook her in a single bound. Then Dzin turned round and bared her fangs.

Mada boldly advanced on the shaggy beast, although Dzin could easily have snapped her fragile opponent in two. But Mada was the more intelligent. Not for nothing had she stopped in the house to snatch something from the shelf. She didn't have a firearm, but she was holding in her fist a silvery bullet, being careful not to be stung by the brown prickles.

Dzin had not yet released the stolen baby. She threateningly reached for Mada with her free paw. Mada dodged it, jumped at Dzin and struck her in the breast.

One blow by the fragile Faetess was enough for the enormous beast to crash backwards to the ground. Her paws quivered convulsive-

ly and her eyes rolled upwards.

Mada snatched up the child without noticing that he too had curled up and gone silent. She ran off, but her way was barred by two more female Faetoids who had accompanied Dzin on her raid.

Mada rushed fearlessly forward, hugging the inert little body to her breast.

Both Faetoids were struck by accurate blows in quick succession. They collapsed. Their paws curled up and their muzzles froze in a grimace.

Without pausing for breath, Mada ran back the way she had come. The spray from the stream helped to bring her to her senses. She looked at Avik for the first time and screamed.

Someone touched her shoulder. Mada looked round to find Ave bending over her. He had heard her cry in the forest and had rushed to her assistance. Gor Terr was standing close by, ready to beat off any attack.

Ave understood everything without having to be told.

"How did this happen?" he asked in a strangled voice.

Mada told him through her tears about the raid by the Faetoids.

She walked beside Ave, pressing the stiff little Avik to her breast. They did not say another word until they were home.

"Isn't there any antidote at all?" cried Mada, wringing her hands after she had laid the infant on its tiny bed.

Ave stood at the shelf, counting up the

rounds of ammunition. Then he turned to Mada.

"Let Mada warm her son. Fortunately, what's missing here is a stun bullet, not a poisoned one. Warmth will bring Avik round."

Gor Terr was carefully refixing the stakes in the window.

Avik's first cry as he came round was no less of a joy to Mada than his very first wail, heard in the house not so long ago.

"This means the Faetoids will recover too," observed Mada.

"That's bad," responded Gor Terr. "They've found the way here!"

Gor Terr proved right. The Faetoids had become completely fearless and began to fight a real war with the newcomers.

Several times, the beasts openly attacked the hunters, who only beat off the animals by using firearms. Their reserves of ammunition were limited. They would hardly last out for more than a few local cycles.

Gor Terr had the idea of fixing a bullet to the end of a spear so as to strike the beasts without losing the bullet. The inspiration for this had been Mada's desperate behaviour in the battle with Dzin.

Ave insisted that stun bullets should be used, not the poisoned ones. He did not want to exterminate the Faetoids, who were Terr's indigenous population.

Gor Terr grumbled about this, but finally agreed.

However, this softness on the part of the

Faetians led to even more ferocity and determination from the Faetoids. The realisation that, if they had a brush with the newcomers, they would wake up alive after only a brief sleep, led to the beasts imagining that they could always get away with it.

It came to the point at which the herd laid systematic siege to the house. The men could not go out hunting and each time they were forced to disperse the frenzied Faetoids waiting for them outside the door.

Gor Terr began determinedly insisting that the enemy should be wiped out.

"Ave's right," objected Mada. "Can we really bring the ill-fated Faena's terrible principles to Terr? The Faetoids didn't come to us, we came to them uninvited. Perhaps we could find a common language with them."

"R-really?" said Gor Terr, astonished, and he became thoughtful.

The situation deteriorated. The Faetoids were no longer the stupid beasts who had originally seized the newcomers in the forest so as to eat them alive. They now seemed guided by will and thought inspired by someone more rational. They were fighting to exterminate the Faetians or drive them away. Mada could not go outside alone for water or golden apples any more. Shaggy bodies could always drop on her from a tree to strangle her or tear her to pieces. Hit by the stun weapon, they recovered consciousness to attack again on the next day. Their brazen determination was impressive and, perhaps, had indeed been born of a feeling

of immunity to punishment. The beasts could evidently understand only crude force and deadly danger.

"They'll all have to be killed off," decided Gor Terr.

But Mada and Ave didn't agree.

"It would be better if we went away from here," suggested Mada. "This is their place. They have the right to drive uninvited guests away."

"Will you ever get away from them?" asked Gor Terr, gloomily doubtful.

"D'you remember the snowy mountains we saw through the upper porthole on *Quest*? We'll go where it's too cold for the Faetoids. They won't come after us."

"You have no r-right to risk the child's life," boomed Gor Terr. "But you're right about one thing. Someone's got to leave here. Either the Faetians or the Faetoids."

From that time on, Gor Terr began disappearing frequently from the house and returning without the usual hunting trophies.

Ave and Mada didn't ask him where he was going, believing that it was up to him to tell them.

He was, in fact, secretly making his way to the gully with the caves. He had selected a reliable shelter and spent a long time observing how the Faetoids lived.

He had marked out an enormous shaggy Faetoid who was evidently the leader of the tribe. Wasn't it he who was conducting the war on the newcomers?

Exceptionally burly and fierce, he dealt ruthlessly with anyone who displeased him. He once gave Dzin a terrible beating: Gor Terr spotted her unerringly among the other beasts. However, it was not just strength that made him superior to the rest of the Faetoids. His brain must have been more developed than that of any other individual.

The Faetoids had not yet developed as far as rational speech, but they nevertheless communicated amongst themselves with monosyllables that differed mainly in cadence. After being beaten, Dzin fled the cave and came upon Gor Terr hiding in a thicket.

She took fright at first, then squatted in silence not far from him, clutching her heels with her forepaws, and began making soft, piteous sounds. When he realised that she was not going to make a noise at the sight of him, Gor Terr didn't strike her with his stunspear. He was conceiving a plan of insane daring, and Dzin could be useful to him.

Every day after that, when Gor Terr went to the hiding-place that he had picked between two close-growing tree-trunks, he would find Dzin waiting for him.

She became a kind of ally to him. Gor Terr could not explain anything to her. But she behaved exactly as he wanted. With her animal instinct, she was able to guess his intentions. Several times, when one of the Faetoids drew near to Gor Terr's hiding-place, Dzin jumped up, screamed threateningly and gesticulated to drive the uninvited beast away.

Gor Terr's dangerous plan was soon ripe for action. He decided to disclose it to the others.

When she heard him, Mada decided that he was having another crazy spell and offered to shock him out of it with an injection.

But Gor Terr was adamant.

"One thing's certain," he affirmed. "The herd's got to be driven out of here; it must be led away. They'll take me for one of themselves. I look sufficiently like them and I know their habits. I'll deal quickly enough with the disobedient ones. I'll become their tyrant, their r-ruler, their dictator. And to their own advantage. I'll teach them sense and r-reason."

It proved impossible to dissuade Gor Terr. He regarded his scheme as the duty of a friend.

"We certainly won't win a war with them," he said. "I'll lead them off into the mountains. When they're settled there, I'll come back to you. You'll already have had lots of children. I'll turn your little ones into r-real Faetians."

Gor Terr began preparing for his exploit as if for an afternoon stroll. In fact, he didn't need to take anything with him.

Ave could not let him go out alone and decided to back him with small-arms fire from under cover if events did not work out as Gor Terr planned.

As Gor Terr had requested, Ave Mar was following Gor Terr at a distance so as not to frighten Dzin. They had embraced as they left the house and had said goodbye in

silence. But Mada had wept in the doorway as she waved Gor Terr goodbye.

Dzin was sitting in her usual attitude. She was waiting.

Ave watched the strange scene from a distance.

Gor Terr went up to the Faetoid, who met him amicably, even warmly. He then took off his Faetian clothes.

He was covered with dense hair, but compared with one of the shaggy beasts he looked almost naked, although in general body shape, height, broad shoulders and stoop he vaguely resembled a Faetoid. He could have been mistaken for one in the dark, but, of course, not in broad daylight or at dusk. So, at least, it seemed to Ave Mar, who feared greatly for his friend. But Gor Terr, unarmed, went fearlessly down into the gully with Dzin.

Ave was gripping a pistol so as to come to Gor Terr's aid; his friend was already approaching the cave from which he had rescued his captive friends.

Ave watched as the Faetoids who met Dzin paid no attention to her companion at first. Then they noticed something unusual about him and began gathering in twos and threes to study the newcomer with the thin hair whom Dzin had brought back with her.

At last, the rest returned from the hunt.

Accompanied by Dzin, Gor Terr went bravely up to them.

Dzin began shrieking something, squatting, falling onto the stones and jumping up again. She must have been explaining that she was

starting a new family and was presenting the one of her choice to the others.

The Faetoids didn't like the one of her choice very much. One beast, at the far end, stood up, rudely thrust Dzin aside and struck the stranger with his forepaw. To be more precise, he had intended to strike. But before he could do so, he shot up into the air and crashed to the ground several paces away. Bellowing, he got up on all fours and sprang at his assailant like a spotted predator. But the stranger dealt him such a blow that the Faetoid spun round on the stones, howling. The others reacted to the incident with what seemed like total indifference. However, no one else dared try his strength with the newcomer.

Interestingly enough, Gor Terr had only to take his clothes off for the beasts not to recognise their former enemy and not even to see any difference between him and themselves.

Sol was rising. It was the beginning of the magnificent dawn that had impressed the Faetians so much during the first days of their sojourn on Terr.

The Faetoids, however, were not admiring it. They were lying down to sleep in their caves.

Only one particularly large beast with repulsive features, flared nostrils and brown fangs protruding from his mouth, wandered from cave to cave as if checking something.

His mental powers were unlikely to have been so developed that he could really have

been capable of checking anything at all. He might simply have been wandering aimlessly from one cave to another.

Any beast he found outside, however, hurriedly disappeared into the darkness under the vaulted roof.

Ave had still not left his observation post, fearing for Gor Terr's safety.

He had stayed there all day, well aware how alarmed Mada must be for him. He was waiting for, and dreading, the showdown between Gor Terr and the leader.

The leader appeared earlier than the rest and summoned all the others with a throaty scream.

Stretching and yawning, the Faetoids emerged reluctantly from their shelters. Gor Terr also came out. Compared with all the others, he now looked almost puny. No wonder the beasts were looking askance at the new arrival. He didn't wait to be attacked, but exhibited his own character.

For no apparent reason, he attacked a fairly inoffensive Faetoid, nimbly knocking him off his hind legs and hurling him down to the bottom of the gully. Another was outraged at this conduct on the newcomer's part, but paid dearly for it. Gor Terr rushed at him in a fury and, pinning him to the stone wall, began banging his head so hard against it that the other howled with pain.

At this point, the infuriated leader decided to put the wild one in his place. He began bellowing with wrath, but this had no effect on the newcomer, who knocked another

beast over and hurled him down to the bottom of the gully.

The leader's patience snapped. He snatched up a heavy stone and threw it at the rebel. Neither Gor Terr nor Ave Mar had been expecting this. Ave nearly fired, drawing a bead on the leader, but desisting when he saw that Gor Terr had nimbly dodged the stone.

That Faetoid knew how to use weapons! This meant that he was more developed than the others!

Ave didn't know what Gor Terr was going to do next, but his friend didn't stop to think. He, too, picked up a stone and threw it at his enemy with much better results.

The leader jumped and then bellowed with fury, hurling himself at Gor Terr. But the other was already rushing to meet his enemy.

The Faetoids were bunched together at the rocky wall, watching the savage battle. Their enormous leader, compared with whom the newcomer was merely a small animal, crushed Gor Terr underneath his own weight.

At this point, Ave realised what he must do.

The Faetoids howled with glee at this duel and the lesson being taught to the newcomer by their leader. Because of all the shouting, the crack of a shot went unnoticed. Ave didn't miss, aiming at the leader's shaggy back just below the powerful neck.

Half-crushed by the heavy body, Gor Terr realised what had happened. As if continuing the fight, he raised the massive, convulsed

body of the leader up on his outstretched arms and hurled him from a rocky ledge down to the bottom of the gully.

The Faetoids tried to look down, gibbering. Those thrown down by Gor Terr had recovered from their beating, had successfully climbed up onto the ledge and were crowded together in the rear of the herd; but their leader was still lying motionless.

Ave had fired the first live round on Terr. The leader was dead.

Dzin bounded nimbly down to the bottom of the gully and began dancing frenziedly near the overthrown body.

Dealing out punches and blows, sometimes knocking the beasts over, Gor Terr drove all the Faetoids back into their caves. He had put a stop to the aggressive campaign evidently launched by his predecessor.

The stranger's incredible strength convinced the beasts that it was useless to resist him.

"The tyrant has seized power," thought Ave. "Now he will teach the Faetoids to use clubs, he will make their hunting more successful, the herd will no longer starve and will be content with the new leader."

Thus did the naked leader appear in the herd of Faetoids.

Ave and Mada never managed to find out anything more about Gor Terr.

Their self-sacrificing friend kept his word, however. He led the herd of Faetoids away somewhere else. No longer did the shaggy beasts annoy the solitary Faetians.

Chapter Six

THE TESTAMENT OF THE GREAT ELDER

Polar, great-great-great grandson of Vydum Polar, the first Marian inventor, who was honoured on Mar alongside Brat Lua, the creator of the first cave shelter, had inherited from his remote ancestor a daring and penetrating mind that was immune to all prohibitions.

He was a young Marian with a handsome, calm and self-confident face, a straight chin and a curly head on the long, sturdy neck typical of the Marians.

He recognised no obstacles in life, being always ready to tear them down. He learned easily and eagerly, flummoxing the teachers with his questions. It seemed to him that the writings of his ancestors concealed something about the origin of the Marians.

Tome Polar would put on a space-suit, without which Marians could not breathe their planet's atmosphere, and would often wander over the desert sands. He was looking among the mountain ridges for a cave that could be used as a laboratory. In it, mentally, he was already carrying out daring experiments on matter.

However, he had neither the instruments nor a cave for his research.

Once upon a time, the first Marians had been lucky. They had found in the mountains an interconnected network of caves with an

underground river flowing through them which they named the River of Life.

Most probably of all, his ancestors had come from a remote region of Mar where the conditions had once been different: the air had been breathable and there had been rivers flowing on the surface of the planet (as now in the caves). That was why the legends told of incredibly large areas of water. After all, every drop of the River of Life in the underground city was precious. They even obtained water artificially, extracting it from mines sunk in distant caves. Water, together with the metal found in the depths, was the basis of Marian civilisation. Owing to the small amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, metal was native. This baffled Tome somewhat. After all, his remote ancestors had breathed in the open air.

Tome Polar finally discovered a convenient little cave with a narrow entrance which could easily be converted into an airlock.

Excited and happy, he went down on to the sandy plain from where he would make his way direct to the oasis of cultivated plants and further on down into the underground city.

In his short life, Tome Polar had not known any landscapes other than the dead Marian sands. They were dear to him and he thought them beautiful. As he walked over them, he sometimes tried to imagine himself crossing the bed of one of the fabulous seas of the ancient Marians. But his sceptical reason gained the uppermost over fantasy.

He could not imagine what was absolutely impossible.

Tome Polar was hoping to return to the city not alone, but with Ena Fae, the most wonderful girl on the planet. At least, so she seemed to him.

He knew where to find her and headed for the clumps of nutritive plants irrigated by water from the underground river. Tome knew from the ancient folk tales that there was even supposed to be water on the surface at their planet's poles, and at a low heat level it solidified there in the form of a hard cap. This cap sometimes melted under Sol's rays. A lovely folk tale! If it could be proved true, the Marians would one day deliver the melted water from the poles to their oases. But, in the meantime, the fabulous accumulations of solid water on Mar, if they existed, were infinitely far away from the underground Marian city.

To the inhabitants of the legendary Faena, the local plants would have looked like sickly bushes. But to Tome Polar, they were an impassable thicket in which it was possible to make out with difficulty several figures in space-suits.

They could all have seemed identical, but not to Tome Polar. He had no difficulty in recognising Ena, who was gathering fruits.

She was the only creature on Mar to whom Tome Polar could confide his secret thoughts. He had decided to do that today. He and Ena would begin experimenting in the new cave

together and they would revolutionise Marian civilisation.

The Marian girl, lissom in spite of her garb, was gathering fruits. Tome Polar went up to the bushes.

Ena Fae recognised him, signalled to him with a wave and followed after him.

They did not switch on the intercom in their helmets so that the others wouldn't hear them talking. They understood one another without words.

The love story of Tome and Ena was touchingly simple. They were brought together by Great Chance, which seemed to be answering a legitimate need. They met during the celebrations for the end of their studies. The young people were singing and dancing in one of the remoter caves.

The stone icicles of stalactites hung from the roof to meet the needles of stalagmites reaching up from the floor. Joined in some places, they formed fantastic columns that seemed to be supporting the roof.

Lit up so that they seemed almost transparent, these colonnades, demolished in other caves to make way for buildings, gave a magical appearance to the place where the young were celebrating.

The young Marians used to enjoy themselves here with all their hearts, donning airtight helmets for a lark to make themselves unrecognisable.

Tome Polar somehow managed to fall for his dancing partner, although he hadn't yet seen her face. It seemed to him that it

ought to be beautiful, so vibrant and tender was her voice, even when muffled by the mask.

When Ena took off her helmet, she turned out to be exactly what he had been expecting.

A straight brow sloping slightly backwards to continue the line of the nose, elongated eyes with a slight slant up towards the temples, russet hair with a heavy bun on the neck so that it did not fit easily into a helmet—such was his new acquaintance, Ena Fae. There was something in her of her great-great-grandmother, Ala Veg; but neither Tome nor Ena had the slightest idea of what she had looked like.

It was love at first sight between the two Marians, as if two torches had been brought to the same fire.

The young couple passed through the entrance airlock, which had always been a source of puzzlement to Tome Polar. Why had it been made entirely of metal (and when there was a permanent metal famine!), round in shape and straining upwards, like the ancient skyscrapers of the legendary Faena? Had the first Marians perhaps wanted to set up a monument to the beautiful fairy tale? Tome Polar, of course did not share the superstitions according to which the tower had once voyaged among the stars with no mechanical means of propulsion. This legend had been born of the unusual shape of the installation which served as an entrance airlock to the city.

There was only one real monument in the

city, the one to the Great Elder. Sculpted out of a stalagmite, the Elder of ancient times towered to his full enormous stature, with his stone beard falling onto his chest and with mystery in the dark, piercing cavities of his eyes.

New deposits had formed with the years on the stone sculpture, and these smoothed over (as in memory) the features of the great Marian of the past who had called himself a Faetian.

The monument to the Great Elder stood in the cave of the young.

It was towards this that Tome Polar and Ena Fae made their way when they had taken off their space-suits.

Nothing, it seemed, could ever come between them to spoil their radiant love and happy life together. Tome and Ena, however, had a hard trial ahead of them.

According to the ancient Marian tradition, it was by the monument to the Great Elder that vows of love and faithfulness were sworn, and also the work was chosen which, from that moment on, the future married couple would take upon themselves. On Mar, the young people bound themselves with ties of marriage which, as they understood it, concerned no one else.

On this spot, the lovers had to declare to one another which path in life each had chosen.

"Ena!" said Tome. "There can be no greater happiness for me than to be with you always, not only in the family but at work. I want you to be a loyal helpmate to me in

the scientific research which I have decided to do."

"Am I ready for this?" said Ena doubtfully, looking admiringly at her betrothed.

"It will be enough for me if you are by my side in our cave-laboratory."

"What cave?" asked Ena, brightening up. "Are they going to give us a small hall?"

"No. I've found myself a cave in the mountains. We'll fit it out ourselves. We'll make airlocks and we'll take with us the air-recycling equipment from spare space-suits."

"But what for?" asked Ena, amazed. "Surely you could find a cave in the underground city?"

"The experiments we are going to do are dangerous. No one believes me, but I suspect that matter has a tendency to disintegrate into even smaller particles than the 'indivisible' ones of which matter consists."

"Matter has a tendency to disintegrate?" echoed Ena in horror.

"Yes, that's the thought I've reached. Of course, it's only a scientific hunch, nothing more. You and I will take a vow here to enrich the Marians with the energy of disintegration."

"No," said Ena Fae firmly. "You're mad to have such ambitions."

"But why? Are you really going to become one of those who misunderstand me?"

"Listen to what, as a Marian girl, I have to say to you. We who bear within us new generations of Marians have had passed down to us the injunction of the Great Elder at

whose monument we now stand."

"The Great Elder bequeathed to us the power of knowledge. What else?"

"Follow me," commanded Ena.

Tome obediently went after her.

Ena took him by a roundabout path. Descending steeply, it led them into a stalagmite cave which was evidently directly underneath the Cave of Youth.

Ena pointed at the roof.

"The Elder above is pointing downwards, and if you follow the line of direction, it runs through a stalactite to indicate some writings."

Sure enough, under the stalactite there was a stone slab fashioned from the base of a removed stalagmite. The deposits on it had been carefully cleaned off.

"Read it!" commanded Ena.

Some passages in the inscription seemed particularly strange to Tome Polar.

"Never must the Marians, descendants of the Faetians, touch those fields of knowledge which led to the destruction of the beautiful Faena. Never must they strive to learn of what matter consists, never must they strive to achieve movement without propulsion. These prohibitions are for the protection of future generations who must be saved from the suffering that comes from such knowledge."

Tome turned to Ena.

"What crude superstition! What did this Elder do to be called great? What do the structure of matter and movement without

propulsion have in common? Apart from that, the deciding question should be, 'Who is in possession of the knowledge?' "

"I don't know enough to argue with you," said Ena, "but what rational people know today can become the property of very different ones tomorrow. That is why the Prohibitions of the Great Elder have been imposed on the Marian women. That duty of ours is higher than anything else. No one must know what is forbidden."

"What d'you mean by 'higher than anything else'?" said Tome, much put out. "Higher than love?"

Ena lowered her eyes.

"Yes, my Tome, even higher than love."

"I don't recognise you!"

Tome Polar could not bear objections, especially if they weren't upheld by the logic of reason. He despised and rejected everything that seemed unfounded. This had been encouraged in him since early childhood by his parents, whom he remembered vaguely (he had been the youngest of nine children), and it had subsequently developed thanks to his own outstanding abilities, enabling him to laugh off any lack of understanding. But to meet with no response from the girl of his choice was too hard for Tome Polar. A spoiled darling of fate, he refused to believe his ears. His mood darkened and he said haughtily:

"I didn't expect your love to be so feeble that it would pale before the first flash of superstition."

"You must make a vow," demanded Ena in a ringing voice that echoed under the roof of the cave, "you must make a vow never again to try and learn the secret of matter which is supposed to be liable to disintegration."

"How can I make such a vow if that is the one thing I yearn for?"

"I thought you were yearning for me..."

Tome Polar was taken aback. He had been ready for anything in the marriage ceremony with Ena Fae except this unreasonable stubbornness. He did not know that his bride was speaking for generations of Faetesses who had handed down their concern for posterity to her. Perhaps the terrible disaster on Faena had awakened in the exiles on Mars a new feature which should guarantee life for the Marians. This had found expression in the Great Elder's Prohibitions, which had been passed on to all without exception.

The tragedy of Faena must not happen again.

Ena realised that Tome Polar would only respond to conviction. She sat beside him on a rock near the stalactite with the inscriptions and told him in a sad voice everything she had learned from her mother about the destruction of Faena.

The exasperated Tome Polar refused to listen. To him, the Marian girl's story was an ignorant fairy tale full of senseless superstitions. What use was the mere assertion that the Faetians who escaped the destruction of their planet had flown from it in a kind of

projectile that, it was claimed, moved on its own without pushing itself off from anything? Incidentally, the possible disintegration of matter was quite rightly not in any way connected with such movement.

Convinced that a Marian girl's fictitious duty, to save the population of Mar from future disasters, was being put higher than her own love for him, Tome Polar decided that she did not truly love him.

Hot-tempered, vain, and, moreover, not one to acknowledge half-measures, he broke it off with the girl he loved and walked out of the stalactite cave on his own.

Behaving like that in the heat of the moment, however, proved much easier than living without Ena afterwards.

Tome Polar began pining away. The population of the underground City of Life (it was so named after the River of Life in the caves) was not so great that Tome and Ena could avoid one another. On the contrary, they kept meeting one another accidentally all the time, and Ena seemed even more beautiful than ever to Tome Polar. He started trying to make a date with her, but Ena was cold and distant. At least she managed to make that impression on him.

He was suffering. "She's simply oppressed by ignorant superstitions," he thought, trying to justify her to himself.

He soon became convinced that he couldn't live without Ena. By this time, his dreams of setting up a laboratory for himself in a distant cave had also faded away. He hadn't

the strength to equip it by himself, and the Marians he approached for help refused, mentioning the hostility of their wives. These, evidently, were prisoners of the same superstitions as the young Ena.

Tome Polar was in despair. The ancient traditions were tightening round him in a ring, as if squeezing the breathing tubes of a space-suit.

Civilisation on Mar had developed in an unusual way. Receiving the heritage of a more ancient culture, the Marians on the whole devoted all their energies not to the struggle with the representatives of the animal world, since the planet's atmosphere was unfavourable for the development of certain species, but to the struggle with the harsh natural environment. It was only possible to live in shelters supplied with artificial air and go out to the surface in space-suits. Plants could be grown successfully at the oases, but the Marians had to supply artificial irrigation and tend them while wearing space-suits. The struggle of rational beings with one another remained only in the memories of long-past generations that had become embodied in the duty of the Marian women and girls.

Perhaps like no other Marian of her kind, Ena felt the full burden of that duty. She suffered more than Tome Polar, because she could renounce her duty in the name of love. She didn't do so, however, never doubting for a moment that she was protecting the whole population of Mar from destruction.

Yet she was the first to call Tome Polar into the Cave of Youth.

Tome Polar was overjoyed. He was no longer hoping for mutual vows at the monument to the Great Elder. He simply wanted to see her.

Ena came to her beloved fully armed with the cunning of her great-grandmothers, who had not lived solely on Mar. She knew perfectly well about his unsuccessful attempts to equip a cave and make the instruments he had invented. She brought with her a flower grown at the oasis.

"Isn't it more important for the Marians to devote all their energies to the struggle for water?" she said, ruffling the petals with her fingers. "I would like my Tome" (she said MY TOME, and his heart missed a beat) "to lay the foundations of an enormous task for the future—to create a river deep underground that will bring the melted waters from the poles to new oases. Isn't that more important than seeking the conditions for the disintegration of matter, forbidden by the Great Elder? Leaves, flowers, fruits..."

Tome Polar had a lively mind. One hint was enough for him to imagine the vast installations of the future irrigation system, as fabulous as the ice caps at the poles. Moreover, he was game for anything just so long as it would bring Ena back to him.

"I surrender, my incomparable Ena," he said, taking the flower from her. "Rather let me leave for the poles in search of melted water than lose you."

So Tome and Ena were joined after overcoming the obstacle that had come between them, and in this way was buried the idea of the disintegration of matter that had arisen so unexpectedly among the Marians. The Great Elder's behest had been fulfilled.

...The struggle for power on Phobo was fought between Vlasta Sirius and Mrak Luton. It ended in favour of the intractable Faetess when Mrak Luton, skillfully driven by her to a heart attack, suddenly died.

Next, Nega Luton, who did not wish to yield her supremacy, was poisoned by a fruit specially grown by Vlasta in the greenhouse.

Left on Phobo, its native inhabitants, the Siruses, lived for many cycles, sick to death of each other's company.

When Dovol Sirius, at an advanced age, fell ill, Vlasta, "desirous of relieving his sufferings", reduced the oxygen supply to his cabin and then, to put an end to them, turned the tap right off.

Vlasta Sirius continued her husband's memoirs and, reduced to despair, with no one left on the station to order about, took her own life by jumping outside without a space-suit. Her rigid corpse, preserved by the absolute cold of interplanetary space, became an eternal satellite of Station Phobo.

Epilogue

THE TALKING BEAST

O forebears, forebears! Who are you?

Toni Fae, Marian poet, early period

Av had not yet reached maturity and still bore his father's abbreviated name, but his younger brother still went by the child's name of Avik.

Av was a strong, graceful boy and resembled his father, from whom he had inherited the long, powerful neck, like a tree-trunk, the curly head and the firm, dimpled chin. The slightly uplifted eyebrows and the clear gaze made his face calm and quizzical. He loved wearing the skin of a spotted predator, slinging its fanged head over his shoulder onto his chest.

Av became first helper to his father, who was finding it increasingly difficult to feed his big family by hunting.

Av was a skillful archer, able to pierce any branch on a tree without missing. The boy made himself a sharp stone knife which was in no way worse than his father's metal one. He taught himself to wield a spear with a sharp stone head that he had fashioned himself. He also had a replaceable metal spear-point with a silvery blade and brown prickles. He didn't know where his father had obtained such a strange spear-point and he kept it for exceptionally difficult duels when he had to fell his dangerous enemy with

a dexterous blow. His mother cautioned him against these fights and could not in any way get used to the idea that her son was in constant danger when hunting in the forest.

The boy merely laughed, which threw Ma, his sister, into raptures.

One day, an enormous reptile with a powerful long body but no legs fell onto him from a tree. It coiled itself round the boy several times, crushing him in a deadly embrace. Av was out hunting alone, a long way from his father. It was no use crying and it was impossible anyway—he couldn't even gasp for breath. Then he acted as his father had taught him: he tensed all his muscles, not letting the serpent crush his ribs in its coils.

It was a silent struggle. The boy realised that he was doomed. He had often watched from the undergrowth as a serpent crushed its victim to death. The boy didn't know how much longer he could hold out. There was a crack as the spear, pressed against his side with his arm, snapped in two.

The fanged head of the spotted predator slung over his shoulder was used by Av as a kind of pocket or bag. A spare spear-point was kept between the jaws. If only he could get at it!

The serpent, its coils wound round his body, was rolling over the ground with him.

The boy was still alive, straining muscles that were on the verge of giving way. He was also watching out for a moment when the maw of the spotted predator was facing the ground.

Fortunately, the serpent itself was rolling its victim over in order to exhaust him completely. Av's hope was justified: the spare spear-point fell out.

He could see it quite near him, but could not reach it with his hand pinned to his side.

From time to time, the serpent loosened its coils to deceive its victim, let him relax and then squeeze him with renewed force.

Av waited for the moment when he could move his wrist and snatched up the spear-point with the sharp prickles on its end.

At this moment, the serpent evidently decided to finish off its obdurate prey once and for all; it tightened its coils so hard that Av fainted.

When he came round, he felt that he was being crushed as before by a long, muscular body, but it was not throbbing as it had done during the struggle. There was indeed something dead about its death-grip. It turned out that even when unconscious, Av had continued straining his body to resist being crushed. Now he relaxed, trying to make himself as thin as possible and began gradually crawling out of the dead serpent's rigid coils.

And so, after surviving and beating in single combat a terrible serpent, Av could receive on coming of age a name associated with his victory.

But he was still just a brave, agile boy for whom manhood was yet to come. He used to dream about this time, developing his own courage and strength.

Although he had become a hunter, he grew up to be kind-hearted nevertheless and he never killed animals except out of dire necessity.

He enjoyed watching from a tree as the little animals frolicked about near their lair.

They were four-footed beasts with mouths full of teeth and they could not climb trees. They had long muzzles, erect ears and bushy tails. They only attacked small animals. In case of need, however, they could hunt in packs and set upon the big denizens of the forest.

Av thought it might be a good idea to train these little animals. His father, after all, had mentioned the domesticated lizards on Faena, which Av imagined to have been a faraway, fabulous land from which his parents had flown like birds.

The little animals were playing on the glade, in full view of Av up in a tree-top.

The little grey balls of fur were rolling over the grass, somersaulting, growling and fighting endlessly with one another. Or they chased one another tirelessly across the glade.

Av saw a cub he liked the look of. He jumped down from his tree no less nimbly than a serpent and seized hold of the terrified little animal. It clawed and bit him, but Av clutched it to his chest and ran off, stuffing its sharp-toothed little muzzle into the spotted predator's skin that he wore for camouflage.

He took his prize home—it had been quietened down by the warmth of his body—fed it and began training it.

His mother was very much surprised at his behaviour. His younger brothers and sisters were in raptures.

The little animal used to play with them. It grew up quickly and became attached to Av. It was evidently in no way inferior to the domesticated lizards of Faena.

When the animal had grown up a little, Av decided to train it to go hunting with him. His father smiled condescendingly at the idea, but in no way interfered with his son's experiments.

Av called his future helper Ding.

The disaster occurred after a domestic ceremony at which Av had been awarded his new name, Serpent, in honour of his victory over that creature.

Serpent insisted that his mother should let Avik go hunting with him. It was time he became an assistant provider.

His younger brother was beside himself with joy and ready to follow Av anywhere.

Ding, of course, had to go with them. Gifted with an amazing nose, he could scent game even before Serpent had noticed it.

...Serpent came back from the hunt alone.

His mother tore her hair and screamed frantically at him:

"You've killed him, you've killed my Avik!"

Serpent turned pale at these words. They were unfair. Serpent could not have been accused of such a crime, although he was partly to blame.

The brothers were walking through the forest. Ding was running ahead. Suddenly,

he stopped and growled. His fur bristled.

Just at that moment, a huge shaggy body fell on him from above. Serpent had heard from his father about the Faetoids which had carried him off as a baby.

Now a beast like one of those described by his father had seized Ding, who yelped, went hoarse and then was silent.

The shaggy beast rushed off with its prey.

Without thinking of his brother (and this was where he was terribly at fault!), he ran after the Faetoid.

The beast was, however, more agile. But Serpent had a determined nature, however. He neither wanted to nor was he capable of backing out, any more than his mother, the young Mada Judi.

With his keen hunter's instinct, he noticed which way the beast had run. Although slower than the beast, he was unerringly following in its tracks.

Serpent found it under a wide-branching tree where it imagined itself to be safe and was devouring the luckless Ding.

Serpent went mad with rage. He did not even shoot an arrow. Blind with fury, incapable of containing himself, he hurled himself at the beast and caught it unawares.

The Faetoid proved smaller than Serpent had imagined at first. He was much stronger and, above all, much more experienced than his opponent. Moreover, he knew his father's fighting tricks.

Serpent overthrew the creature; it lay helpless beside the mangled corpse of Ding

which it had not yet finished eating. Serpent was just about to finish the creature off, when it said:

"Do r-rationals kill those who are lying down?"

Serpent jumped back and asked in horror:

"Who are you, a talking beast?"

"I am a r-rational amid Terrans."

The creature was talking in Serpent's native Faetian, but with an unfamiliar burr. Even so, it was talking. The flabbergasted Serpent let go of it. He wanted to ask where it came from and who had taught it Faetian.

But the beast, which called itself rational and was able to speak, was cunning into the bargain.

No sooner had Serpent relaxed his hold, prepared to carry on with the conversation, than his shaggy opponent sprang on to its hind-legs and jumped up onto the lowest branch of the tree. A moment later, it vanished into the foliage.

The dismayed Serpent rushed in pursuit of the Faetoid, but then stopped, deep in thought.

Only then did he fear for his brother Avik. What had happened to him? The little boy must have been left behind while he chased after the talking beast.

Stifling his alarm, Serpent ran back over the scarcely noticeable tracks that had brought him to the spot.

Serpent could run for great distances without losing his breath. But this time he felt short of air, his lungs were ready to

burst and his heart seemed about to jump out of his breast. Even so, he did not slow down until he reached the ill-fated spot where poor Ding had been carried off.

His experienced hunter's eye immediately pictured the drama that had been enacted there.

Avik had proved himself to be a true Fae-tian, although still a small boy. Judging by the traces of the fight, he had put up a desperate resistance.

But there had been many attackers and they had overpowered the little lad. Serpent found the route by which they had carried him off. For a long time he pursued the kidnappers until he realised that he had lost too much time and it would be impossible to overtake them.

Dusk had fallen on the forest as, stumbling over the tree-roots, Serpent made his way back home in utter despair. His arms dangled helplessly down by his sides, his head was bowed on his breast.

Thus he returned home alone on that tragic day and told his mother everything.

...Mada went crazy with grief and screamed that he had killed Avik. She meant that he was responsible for his brother's death, but the proud Serpent flared up. Perhaps it was his grandfather's blood in him, not just his mother's. He was stung by the accusation she hurled at him. If his mother was capable of such a reproach, then he would go away to the caves and would live there on his own.

Mada was too crushed by grief to recollect herself and restrain her son.

She lay on the threshold with her hair unloosed and, through a veil of tears and the evening mist that reminded her of the lost Faena, she saw her beloved firstborn disappear behind the trees.

But she was threatened by yet another loss.

The lissom form of Ma, her elder daughter, slipped past her. Without a second thought, the girl had gone to follow Serpent.

When he came back that night from the hunt, Ave was shaken by the despondency with which he was met at home.

On learning about the double disaster—the loss of Avik and the departure of the elder children—Ave's face darkened and he thrust his hand into his thick, greying beard.

"Even if I'm in the wrong, and I am in the wrong, of course," said Mada to her husband, "how will Serpent and Ma be able to live on their own? You must bring them back."

"That's got to be done!" replied Ave. "On their own, they won't be able to beat off attacks by the Faetoids, who have resumed the war with us. Their first catch, our poor Avik, will only make them even more fierce and determined."

"I refuse to believe it!" protested Mada. "If Gor Terr lived for so long with them and taught them a thing or two, they could have kidnapped our Avik so that he could teach them too. But you've got to bring Serpent and Ma back."

"I'll find them," promised Ave, and he

added thoughtfully, "It'll be a good thing if you're right about Avik."

Like a truly courageous Faetian, he was trying not to let his wife see how shattered he was by it all.

"I'm worried about that talking beast."

"All my hopes are on him!" intervened Mada. "According to what Serpent told me, he talks like our beloved friend, Gor Terr."

"That's just what's bothering me."

"But I'm delighted. Even Dzin had a feeling of gratitude. The talking beast, whoever he may be, could save Avik."

"He must be a pupil of Gor Terr's. You were saying yourself that when Gor Terr became a leader, he hoped to teach the beasts a great deal."

"But why have they come back? Perhaps Gor Terr isn't alive... Either he wouldn't have let them come here, or he would have come to us."

"Who knows what's happened to our friend after all these years?" sighed Ave Mar.

"Perhaps they need another leader and they came for a Faetian," said Mada.

"I'll find Serpent and we'll look for the new lair of the Faetoids together. Perhaps we'll meet Gor Terr or even find Avik still alive. Anyway, we'll catch one of the talking beasts and question him."

Ave did not manage to carry out his plan, however. Serpent and Ma had gone somewhere a long way away. They weren't to be found in the nearby caves. He could only hope that they hadn't fallen victim to the Faetoids.

Perhaps in another forest they had founded a new station for the descendants of the Faetians on Terr. The offended hunter hadn't forgiven his mother for her reproach, although he had deserved it to some extent.

Nothing was known of Avik either.

Life continued for Ave and Mada with their family. As if to take over from the lost Avik and the runaway children, Mada gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and their mother was fully occupied in caring for them. As if she hadn't enough cares already.

She cooked for the whole family, treated hides with her younger daughters so as to sew, with the aid of tendons, primitive clothing and footwear for the growing children, herself and Ave. They had to gather medicinal herbs, about which Mada knew a great deal, and not just because she had once been a Sister of Health. She had been attending to all the members of her big family. She hadn't time to help Ave with the hunting.

After the working day, when darkness had fallen, keeping the fire going in the hearth and grinding the day's harvest of corn in a stone mortar with a stone pestle, Mada would tell her children fairy tales.

She didn't invent anything, she simply recalled her life on Faena. But for the little Terrans, living in the dense forest, stories about houses as high as the clouds, or about rooms that moved about and even went up into the air like birds, and even of the piloted star on which her parents landed on Terr,

all sounded like an amazing, unattainable and incredible fairy tale.

Ave Mar also used to listen to these stories about the irrevocable past as he dozed on his couch after an exhausting day.

He would listen and could never understand whether he was having fantastic dreams or whether he was remembering long-forgotten pictures from the words of the now white-haired but still beautiful Mada.

And, to the rhythmic murmur of her infinitely beloved voice, the first Faetian on Terr wondered what lay in store for his children and grandchildren.

Would the Faetoids return? Surely the talking beast that Serpent had let go would feel duly grateful and would not only save Avik, but would lead the Faetoids away, as Gor Terr had done in his time? Or were neither Gor Terr nor Avik still alive, and was the war with the Faetoids about to begin again? And who would survive in that conflict? Who would settle the planet with a race of rational beings: the descendants of the Faetians or those of the Faetoids? In the process of development, they would begin to resemble the present-day Faetians. Otherwise the law of development of all living creatures would have to be seen in a wider perspective than had been thought of on Faena. It must be extended from one planet to all inhabited worlds! Rational beings could appear everywhere and could migrate to those planets where rational beings had not yet appeared. They would enter into conflict

with the less developed. Was this not the meaning of the all-embracing law of the struggle for existence in which Reason must come out on top.

Ave decided to carve the history of his family on a cliff in the mountains where he went hunting.

One day, his rational descendants would read the inscription.

But what would they be like?

THE END

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